

THE AMERIKA MACHINE: ART AND TECHNOLOGY
BETWEEN THE USA AND THE USSR, 1926 TO 1933.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis concerns the meeting of art and technology in the cultural arena of the American avant-garde during the late 1920s and early 1930s. It assesses the impact of Russian technological Modernism, especially Constructivism, in the United States, chiefly in New York where it was disseminated, mimicked, and redefined. It is based on the paradox that Americans travelling to Europe and Russia on cultural pilgrimages to escape America were greeted with ‘Amerikanismus’ and ‘Amerikanizm’, where America represented the vanguard of technological modernity. They returned to America with examples of and reports on Constructivism and an attendant enthusiasm for American technology, which manifested as ‘machine art’. It proved deeply problematic when Leftist artists attempted to marry this notion of Amerika with a critique of the divisiveness of American industry and tried to construct a radical Americanism with the tools of Amerikanizm.

This study covers work in several media, including photography, cinema, theatre, literature, printmaking, and architecture. I chart the introduction of Constructivism into America through publications and exhibitions during the period. The first chapter follows the emergence of Constructivism in Europe and its arrival in America, most notably at the 1927 Machine-Age Exposition, and its slow transformation into the apolitical International Style. Chapter Two assesses the impact of Constructivist theatre in America, with particular reference to the radical New Playwrights Theatre. The third chapter concerns the machine aesthetic in the photography of Ralph Steiner and Walker Evans. The final chapter addresses the discourse and practice of montage in the American experimental cinema. I am concerned with a period that straddles the Crash of 1929, but precedes the New Deal relief programmes. It is an analysis of culture at the blurred boundary of radical politics and experimentation.

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INTRODUCTION

An Amerika Machine.

Machinery is accomplishing in the world what man has failed to do by preaching, propaganda, or the written word. The aeroplane and wireless know no boundary. They pass over the dotted lines on the map without heed or hindrance. They are binding the world together in a way no other system can. The motion picture with its universal language, the aeroplane with its speed, and wireless with its coming international programme—these will soon bring the whole world to a complete understanding. Thus we may vision a United States of the World. Ultimately it will surely come!

Henry Ford, 1929.¹

The Five Year Plan is the big dynamo operating the tremendous machine of the USSR. The whole world advances to its tremendous rhythm. Tall factory chimneys spill black smoke against the sky. The hum and lilt of machinery echoes everywhere. Buildings are climbing skyward, zig-zagged with scaffolds. Bang of hammer, clack of piston, drone of motor join in the sweeping symphony of construction.

Ed Falkowski, 1931.²

In 1931, the Russian-born American artist Louis Lozowick travelled with a party of members of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers to the far reaches of the USSR in Central Asia, beyond the usual extent of the Soviet 'Grand Tour'. Lozowick subsequently produced several lithographs, based on drawings made during the trip, which documented the hitherto tribal and feudal Tajikistan at a moment of massive change. Some of these were published in *Theatre Arts Monthly*, where Lozowick wrote:

here in the pathway of the Sassanian kings, Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, and Tamerlane, the radical changes brought by the Soviet have been greater than in the Soviet Union as a whole: from the wooden plow and the tiny individual plot to the latest agricultural machinery and collective farming; from polygamy and child marriage to complete equality of the sexes.³

¹ Henry Ford, *My Philosophy of Industry*, London: George G. Harrap and Co., 1929, pp. 44-5.

² Ed Falkowski, 'Red Dynamo', *The Left*, Spring-Autumn 1931, p. 22.

³ Louis Lozowick, 'The Theatre of Turkestan', *Theatre Arts Monthly*, November 1933, p. 887. Much the same collection was published as '4 Drawings from Tadjikistan by Louis Lozowick' in *International Literature: Organ of the International Union of*

Whilst some of the lithographs were touristic, detailing residual quirks of Tajik culture, such as the frenzied equine sport of ‘goat-ripping’, others focused on the contrast of tradition and change, as the new Soviet machine age transformed the Tajik way of life (Fig. 1). In *Airport, Tajikistan* (Fig. 2) a Soviet aviator cheerfully tinkers with his plane, amused at the lackadaisical Tajik shading himself beneath the fuselage, as if the aircraft was merely an elaborate sun awning. Sitting squat in profile, his loose attire, turban, and beard contrast with the aviator’s sleek, modern appearance. In *Steam Shovel in Desert, Tajikistan* (Fig. 3) the silhouetted Tajik operating the giant machine appears absurdly small, almost a token detail included to measure its sheer scale. If this juxtaposition appears disharmonious, then conversely there is a sense of wonder in the ability of this lone Tajik tribesman to master such technology, underscoring the transformative power of sovietization.

Collective Farmer (Fig. 4) especially captures the collision of old and new. It shows a Tajik driving a mighty tractor across a vast expanse of land, possibly in the process of cultivating cotton, the region’s most valuable crop; although Lozowick represented the terrain as more like desert than arable land. Removed from his indigenous transport, such as camel or horse (as in *Coming for Cotton, Tajikistan* and *Border Guards* respectively) (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6), and without oxen, he appears incongruous. This awkwardness is underlined by the cramped composition, with its photographic close-up and oblique viewpoint. As this tractor (or ‘full-track crawler’, to be precise) is steered by belts rather than a wheel, he seems to control the machine by reins. Perched on the mechanical beast of burden, his face nonetheless registers steely determination for the huge task at hand. Two other tractors are visible across the great plain, emphasizing the scale of the farm as a means of extolling the immensity of Soviet Union and its transformations.

In Central Asia, the tractor was the supreme symbol of sovietization. In *Dawn Over Samarkand: The Rebirth of Central Asia*, Lozowick’s travelling companion Joshua Kunitz wrote that the tractor was the machine that best communicated the transformative

Revolutionary Writers, No.3, 1933. An accompanying note stated that Lozowick and Kunitz had travelled with Otto Luibn (Norway), E. E. Kisch (Germany), Paul Vaillant-Conturier (France), Bruno Jasienski (Poland), p. 52.

power of the revolution to the Tajiks: ‘the moment the poor peasant discovered that working the soil with a tractor was easier, better, cheaper, faster than struggling with an *omach* [primitive plough], he became excellent potential material for a kolkhoz [collective farmer]’.⁴ He then pondered, ‘is it surprising that one of the Bolshevik slogans Central Asia was “The enemy of the tractor is our class enemy?”’⁵ Indeed, the organizational centres for collectivization were the Machine and Tractor Stations (MTS), which provided each kolkhoz with tractors, repairs, fuel, and training.⁶

The tractor was valorized in films such as Alexander Dovzhenko’s *Earth* and Sergei Eisenstein’s *The General Line* (both 1929)—in the latter the workers at a kolkhoz ecstatically greet the arrival of the tractor that has been collectively purchased (Fig 7 and Fig. 8). *The General Line* was alternately known as *Old and New*, and the tractor especially represented the point where the Soviet machine age ploughed through residual medievalism of the Tsar’s minions. The first section of Kunitz’s book also concerned this clash of old and new:

Central Asia is in a paroxysm of change. The immemorial droning of the somnolent East is drowned out by the strains of the *Internationale* mingled with the sirens of new factories and the hum of American and Soviet motors...For years now Central Asia has been a medley of clashing values. The revolution has unleashed a whirlwind of passion. The old fights back, desperately, brutally. But the new is triumphantly advancing. Even those who cling to the old cannot resist the magnificent upsurge of the new. History has executed a sudden *volte-face*: the West is carrying civilization back to its place of origin.⁷

As Kunitz relayed, American technology was the means of sovietization. The development of the Soviet tractor was essentially the story of American production and construction techniques imparted by Americans to Russians, grafting a socialist political philosophy to capitalist technology to create a necessary hybrid. Dana G. Dalrymple points out that whilst in 1924 there were just 1,000 tractors in the whole country, by

⁴ Joshua Kunitz, *Dawn Over Samarkand: The Rebirth of Central Asia*, New York: International Publishers, 1935, p. 205.

⁵ Ibid, p. 206.

⁶ Ibid, p. 208.

⁷ Ibid, p. 14.

1934 there were around 200,000.⁸ Between 1922 and 1923, imports of American tractors rose over tenfold, from twenty-six to 356. In 1923, the journal *Soviet Russia Pictorial*, founded by the Comintern-affiliated Friends of Soviet Russia to promote Russo-American relations, had a cartoon by Don Brown on the cover showing an American handing a Russian worker a tractor, with the caption ‘Across the Globe: Tractors for our Russian Fellow Workers’ (Fig. 9).⁹

Dalrymple writes that ‘through the mid-thirties, most of the tractors in the Soviet Union were of American manufacture or copied from American designs. When copied, they were manufactured in plants designed, built, and operated under American guidance. And in some case, Americans guided the Russians in the use of tractors’.¹⁰ From the earliest years, Lenin was adamant that the importation of American tractors was key to the success of the Revolution, yet they did not appear in Russia in mass until the middle 1920s—by 1926 9,733 American tractors in Russia had been imported and by 1931 imports peaked at 23,442. In 1927, 85% of tractors in Russia were Fordsons—International Harvester, John Deere, Case, and Allis-Chalmers tractors also were later imported.¹¹ Boris Ignatovich’s photograph *The First Tractor (American Fordson Tractor)* of 1927 (Fig. 10) celebrates the arrival of American tractors. Here a Soviet boy sits astride the bonnet of a tractor, the Ford Motor Company’s Fordson model, grinning wildly and waving his fur cap as if to herald the coming transformation of the Soviet Union.

With the tractor, a single machine encapsulated the machine aesthetic of ‘Amerikanizm’, the Soviet cult of American technology. Maurice Hindus attended a wedding where a trojka was drawn by a Fordson, and wrote that ‘there are Fordson days and Fordson festivals in Russian villages. I have read of agricultural communes that

⁸ Dana G. Dalrymple, ‘The American Tractor Comes to Soviet Agriculture: The Transfer of a Technology’, *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 2, Spring 1964, p. 191.

⁹ *Soviet Russia Pictorial*, May 1923. Tractors previously adorned the covers of the 15 July and 15 October 1922 issues of *Soviet Russia*, the antecedent of *Soviet Russia Pictorial*. See also ‘American Pioneers in Russia’, *Soviet Russia Pictorial*, January 1923, p. 3, for an illustrated feature on the Tractor Unit of the Friends of Soviet Russia.

¹⁰ Dalrymple, ‘The American Tractor Comes to Soviet Agriculture’, p. 191

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

have adopted the name of Fordson'.¹² Although hostile to Socialism and unions, the Ford Motor Company was naturally loath to refuse business of any kind and thus happy to sell tractors and lend experts for a price to the nascent Soviet Union—or as Lenin acutely observed, 'some manufacturers appear to have begun to realize that making money with Russia is wiser than making war with Russia, which is a good sign. We shall need American manufactures—locomotives, automobiles, etc.—more than those of any other country'.¹³

In 1932, the year after Lozowick's journey, only thirty-three American tractors were imported into Russia. This was because Tractorstroi, a Soviet tractor plant at Stalingrad completed in 1930, was now in full production. *Collective Farmer* was produced at a moment of great change in Soviet tractor production and a large stride in the Five Year Plan. The American architect Albert Kahn, who has previously built Ford's Dearborn, designed Tractorstroi and American engineers trained Russians to operate the factory. In 1930, Margaret Bourke-White extensively photographed the factory, and her photographs were printed in her book *Eyes on Russia* the following year (Fig. 11). By travelling to Russia in 1930, Bourke-White had a unique status as an American photographer. The photographs and text in *Eyes on Russia* were imbued with the spirit of technological optimism of 'Amerikanizm'. M. F. Agha described her as an 'industrial romantic' and found that 'there is a great deal of literary pathos about her factory chimneys and her machinery is rather sentimental. Such an attitude, however, has its sociological justification and is equally apt to enchant the American executives and the Bolshevik officials-enthusiasts of the "industrial plan"'.¹⁴ One photograph was reproduced in Hindus's *Red Bread* with the slogan 'The Russians regard the tractor as

¹² Maurice Hindus, *Humanity Uprooted*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1931, p.356, and 'Henry Ford Conquers Russia', *The Outlook*, June 29, 1927, quoted in Dalrymple, 'The American Tractor', p. 194.

¹³ V. I. Lenin, 'Talk with Lincoln Eyre, Correspondent of *The World*', 21 February 1920, reprinted in V. I. Lenin, *On the United States of America*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1967, p. 447.

¹⁴ M. F. Agha, Review of *Photographs by Three Americans*, April 18 to May 8, 1931, John Becker Gallery. Margaret Bourke-White, Ralph Steiner, Walker Evans. Printed on verso of exhibition flyer.

the chief conquering weapon of the Kolkhoz' (Fig. 12).¹⁵ *Eyes on Russia* was followed by a series of five photo essays for *The New York Times Magazine* in 1932. With titles such as 'Where the Worker Drops the Boss: In Soviet Russian the Man Behind the Machine is More Important than the Man Who Directs His Operations' and 'Silk Stockings in the Five Year Plan: Despite the Soviet Drive and the New Order of Things, Russia's Women are Still Feminine', Bourke-White's articles enthused about Russian society in its entirety. Her photographs varied from intimate portraits of Russians, young and old, to epic industrial landscapes. The man behind the machine was an American engineer, John Calder, who had supervised the construction of Tractorstroi and the giant Urals steel plant Magnito-Gorsk. Calder was the model for 'Carter', the machine-like American engineer in Nikolai Pogodin's 1929 play *Temp (Tempo)* about workers at Tractorstroi.¹⁶ Indeed, if the tractor was the mechanical analogue to Amerikanizm, then the personification of American technological expertise was the engineer—a model, increasingly in Europe as well as Russia, for the 'expert', the 'Producer', and, of course, the Constructivist.

The journeys of Bourke-White and Lozowick, manifested in their textual and visual observations, were emblematic of the complex cultural traffic between America and the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s. This thesis concerns the curious nexus in which the USA and the USSR, deeply antipathetic societies in their configuration, were interlocked, at a point where art met technology in the cultural arena of the avant-garde. Constructivism was an especial case. Defined against the grand traditions of European art, including the most recent modernist permutations, the Soviet Constructivists embraced the model of the public serving and versatile American engineer, as a means of supplanting the self-absorbed garret-bound bohemian, in an apparent triumph of science and society over mysticism and the individual. During the 1920s, Soviet Constructivism infiltrated the European, and especially German, avant-garde, instigating 'International Constructivism', a more diffuse tendency that was more broadly utopic and less overtly imbued with communist propaganda. American artists, critics, gallery

¹⁵ Maurice Hindus, *Red Bread*, New York: Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, 1931, opposite p. 336.

¹⁶ Hans Rogger, 'Amerikanizm and the Development of Russia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 23, No. 3, July 1981, p.383.

owners, and collectors encountered this latter form following the 'First Exhibition of Russian Art' at the van Diemen Gallery in Berlin in 1922. Through publications, such as *Broom* and *The Little Review*, and exhibitions, such as the 1926 International Theatre Exposition and the Machine-Age Exposition the following year, Constructivism was consumed in America as 'machine art'.

This yet broader category was stretched to include artists such as Fernand Léger and Enrico Prampolini, as well as earlier movements, such as Cubism, Futurism, and Dada, but was nonetheless conceived according to a discourse that emanated from Constructivism. The semantic openness of machine art allowed its availability for appropriation by disparate interest groups that shared a wide discursive field. These groups, which ranged from the commercial to the politically radical, were oriented around a machine aesthetic, creating a paradoxical cultural phenomenon, as there was no obvious capitalist or communist element of a machine, in actuality or representation, which could be detached and used in a symbolically unitary way.

The polysemic nature of the machine sign was evident in the conflicting interpretations at the Machine-Age Exposition, discussed in Chapter One, which celebrated 'a great new race of men in America: the Engineer', who 'has created a new mechanical world'.¹⁷ With an extensive collection of Russian art and architecture, the Machine-Age Exposition was a pivotal moment in the process of the importation of Constructivism into America. It was also the largest exhibition of new techniques in European architecture to date in America, a consequence of its origins as an architecture exhibition. It was barely noticed by the press and public at the time, who were busy marvelling at Charles Lindbergh's aeronautic feats, but would have considerable influence, I argue, on the direction taken by the ideologues at the Museum of Modern Art in the early 1930s, when it was unofficially reproduced in two exhibitions, the Modern Architecture: International Exhibition of 1932 and Machine Art of 1934. These latter exhibitions completed a process already underway at the Machine-Age Exposition—the voiding of political value from Constructivism, and its transformation

¹⁷ Jane Heap, 'Machine-Age Exposition', *The Little Review*, Spring 1925, p. 22.

into a corporate friendly ‘International Style’, or the collapse of the avant-garde into the Modernism followed it.¹⁸

However, this process of abstraction perhaps stemmed from the fragility of the original model—Constructivism had lost much of its impetus and influence by 1927, as its progenitors slowly abandoned its residual ‘art’ vestiges, developing forms of propaganda that might communicate to the masses more directly. Yet the celebration of American technology remained as the Soviet Union shook off the New Economic Policy and commenced the Five Year Plan in 1928. The technological variant of ‘Amerikanizm’ now referred to the massive industrialization and rationalization of agriculture with American technology and techniques, especially the ‘scientific’ rationalized systems of production known as ‘Fordism’ and ‘Taylorism’, with the aim of dragging a bankrupt, archaic society into modernity. Henry Ford’s assembly line and Frederick Winslow Taylor’s system of labour management were celebrated as the means with which to achieve Socialism.

A central contradiction, however, lay in the fact that socialists in America had long associated these processes with the most aggressive and oppressive forms of labour management and the dehumanization of the worker. In 1913, Lenin himself had been wary, dismissing Taylorism as a ‘“scientific” system of sweating’ that drained ‘every drop of the wage-slave’s nervous and physical energy’.¹⁹ The following year, he had termed it ‘man’s enslavement by the machine’, but noted that ‘the Taylor system—without its initiators knowing or wishing it—is preparing for the time when the proletariat will take over all social production and appoint its own workers’ committees for the purpose of properly distributing and rationalising all social labour’.²⁰ The self-managing proletariat would benefit from the increased productivity. The question

¹⁸ The differentiation is based on Peter Bürger’s distinction of the historical avant-garde, as a force that ‘negates’ the ‘autonomy of art’ by demanding its social integration, from a more general Modernism, which is more typically autonomous. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. M. Shaw, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 46.

¹⁹ V.I. Lenin, ‘A “Scientific” System of Sweating’, *Pravda*, 13 March 1913, reprinted in *V.I. Lenin on the United States of America*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1967, p. 60.

²⁰ V. I. Lenin, ‘The Taylor System—Man’s Enslavement by the Machine’, *Put Pravdy*, 13 March 1914, *ibid.*, p. 99

remained, however, whether a socialist society built on capitalist production methods, yet nominally free of class divisions, would be free of exploitation or not?

This contradiction was problematic for those on the Left who enthused over the machine aesthetic and marvelled at Soviet Constructivism. In the second chapter, I consider the introduction of theatrical Constructivism into America, focusing on the New Playwrights Theatre. The New Playwrights hoped that applying Constructivist stage techniques in an American setting, thus aligning Constructivism with American radicalism, would stoke the smouldering fire of revolution. In contrast to the International Constructivism promoted at the International Theatre Exposition by the Austrian émigré Frederick Kiesler, who had actually travelled to America to curate the exhibition, the New Playwrights aimed to establish a machine aesthetic closer to the Soviet theatre of Vsevolod Meyerhold—a popular theatre that both entertained and educated, was formally dynamic, and which celebrated the machine at every stage, from the movements of the actors to the geometry of the stage sets. With a fanfare of machine fervour, the New Playwrights burst onto the American theatre in early 1927. Their plays addressed the political topics of the day—from America’s iniquitous racial inequalities to corruption in government—with a mixture of music, slang, farce, and tragedy that combined to form a radical Americanism. I focus here on plays that were most concerned with technology and the machine aesthetic, where Constructivist stage settings accompanied narratives that conveyed the horrors of the life in the machine age. The theatre was savaged by critics and folded months before the Great Crash, finding no quarter in the whirling affluence of the 1920s.

The New Playwrights’ example did, however, problematize the notion that Soviet radical art was stripped of its politics as it travelled westwards and emerged in America as apolitical Modernism. In Chapter Three, I wonder how sensible such a narrative of dissipation is in relation to photography. By comparing photographs produced by the American Ralph Steiner with work by László Moholy-Nagy, the Bauhaus theorist of the ‘New Vision’, I counter Abigail Solomon Godeau’s theory that the inception in 1939 of Moholy-Nagy’s American version of the Bauhaus, the School of Design in Chicago, completed a process by which the political potency of Soviet ‘Radical Formalism’ in photography dissipated as it moved through Germany towards

America. Whilst Solomon Godeau reduces American photography of the period to the legacy of Alfred Stieglitz, I argue that Steiner and Walker Evans produced images of industrial and urban scenes with an angular, precise technique that was closer to photography associated with Constructivism, by Moholy-Nagy and Alexander Rodchenko, than it was to the mystical formalism of the Stieglitz circle. Such reductions are refuted here for a fuller understanding of the dynamic dissemination of photographic images during the period. However, the emphasis of this chapter shifts as I look at work produced by Steiner and Evans in the early years of the Depression, following the Crash of 1929. Steiner and Evans both appeared tired of style and subject of the New Vision to focus rather on archaic scenes. I consider the radical Americanism touched upon in the previous chapter, and locate a politics of resistance in atypically political areas of photography, looking particularly at images of arcane and of ruined architecture.

In Chapter Four, I develop this latter point in relation to short experimental films by Steiner, Jay Leyda, and Lewis Jacobs. After the collapse of the New Playwrights Theatre, the next (and last) significant group to promote a politicized machine aesthetic, in this case derived from Soviet cinematic montage, was the cluster of filmmakers and critics that was oriented around the journal *Experimental Cinema* and the Workers Film and Photo League at the turn of the 1930s, and which included Steiner, Leyda, and Jacobs. In this chapter, I chart the importation of Soviet cinema into the country and the resultant discourse on montage, as well as detailing the emergence of experimental cinema in America. If film experimentation was, naturally, central for the editors of *Experimental Cinema*, then it was less important to the activists at the League. These diverging interests, compounded by a crippling shortage of funds, caused a schism that massively frustrated the development of a complex and effective political cinema in America that might rival the Soviet example. The three filmmakers discussed here straddled the apparently discrete areas of experimental and political cinema, and were later important members of the larger, better funded and arguably more potent film movement of the New Deal (Leyda and Jacobs also became two of America's foremost film historians).

This mature phase of American political film lies outside the scope of this thesis. The period concerned here, 1926 to 1933, does not correspond to an actual historical

period, such as the 'Interwar Period' or the 'New Deal', or to the timeframe of an art historical tendency, such as Fauvism or Futurism. The first half of the 1920s witnessed partial reports on cultural production in Russia and some minor exhibitions, but it was the International Theatre Exposition in 1926 that first brought a significant amount of Soviet art to New York. 1926 also saw the Société Anonyme's Brooklyn Exhibition, a major display of painting and sculpture that introduced an American audience to, amongst others, El Lissitzky, Heinrich Hoerle, and Fritz Seiwert. 1926 saw the arrival of the Film Guild, which would in 1929 open the Film Guild Cinema, a Constructivist cinema in Manhattan, and the arrival of Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin* to American screens—not the first Russian film in the USA but certainly the first to generate widespread interest. In 1926 Ralph Steiner had his first exhibition at J. B. Neumann's Print Room (Neumann also displayed work by Boris Aronson, Lozowick, and Charles Sheeler that year), Walker Evans began taking photographs, and the New Playwrights Theatre was founded (although productions did not commence until the following year). Essentially, in 1926 many loose clusters of activity began to coalesce, particularly around the journal *New Masses*, which was founded in May that year.

If 1926 marked an intensification of the machine aesthetic, then the Crash of 1929 brought a partial decline. The case of Ralph Steiner is worth considering, as an exemplar. Working between 'art photography' and advertising and producing similar work for commercial projects and gallery exhibitions, his photography in the 1920s was almost paradigmatic of the machine aesthetic, with its acute angular perspective on skyscrapers and abstracted industrial scenes. By 1929, he was already moving away from such imagery, focusing instead on archaic architecture on an orthogonal axis, and concentrating on experimental filmmaking. He continued to photograph skyscrapers, but only for commercial commissions. In 1931, he joined the Workers Film and Photo League and participated, as a technician rather than activist photographer or filmmaker, in a politically radical cultural forum. By 1933, he was becoming stifled by the limitations of the League and left in 1934, to set up NYKINO with Leo Hurwitz, a body which produced Steiner's *Café Universal* and *Pie in the Sky*, political satires based on fictional material. The following year he made a short film for the Works Progress Administration, entitled *Hands* and co-directed with Willard van Dyke.

1933 is a necessary cut-off point for this thesis. In March 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was inaugurated as President, initiating the major relief programmes of the New Deal.²¹ In cultural terms, the New Deal generated a huge creative output, produced under the auspices of the Public Works of Art Project (1933-1934), the Treasury Section of Fine Arts (1934-43), the Treasury Relief Art Project (1935-38), the WPA's federal cultural art, theatre, music, and writers projects (1935-43), the documentary films of the Resettlement Administration (including *The Plow that Broke the Plains* of 1936, which featured camera work by Steiner) and the documentary photography programmes of the Farm Security Administration (1937-1942). This thesis is concerned with American culture before this great wave of public works, with structures that emerged independently of the state, whether autonomously or with assistance from the Comintern. Furthermore, in November 1933 Roosevelt's administration recognized the Soviet Union and opened formal diplomatic relations. This thesis looks at the fragmented, unofficial cultural traffic between these countries from the mid-1920s, when the memories of the 'Red Scare' of 1919 were fading, when fear and suspicion turned to fascination and curiosity, and when a film such as Vsevolod Pudovkin's 1927 *The End of St. Petersburg* could pack out the Roxy cinema in New York, the largest cinema in the world.

1933 also saw the publication of E. E. Cummings's *Eimi*, an ultra-modernist but profoundly critical travel journal of a 1931 visit to Russia, a book that was deeply unpopular with the Soviet Union's supporters. *Eimi* was important as a marker of the point where tendencies within modernist cultural practice that coexisted in the inchoate pluralism of the 1920s became strictly opposed in the troubled 1930s, and former friends such as Cummings and Louis Aragon became political enemies. Cummings, alongside other American participants in the Great War such as John Dos Passos, Malcolm Cowley, and Ernest Hemingway, had been a protagonist in the post-war expatriate Parisian holiday. In one sense, the 1930s witnessed the decline of the 'American in Paris' trope, for when economic conditions worsened in the United States and

²¹ The Emergency Banking Act and the Economy Act in March, the Agricultural Adjustment Act in May, and the National Industrial Recovery Act in June were the first legislative interventions against the Depression by the Roosevelt Administration.

Americans looked increasingly towards the apparently miraculous example of the USSR, the Soviet pilgrimage came to some extent to replace the Parisian escapade—the latter’s seemingly flippant self-indulgence being out of step with a prevailing attitude of collective social responsibility.

For many, the transatlantic journey to Paris had been an escape from America. In the foreword to the 1932 volume *Americans Abroad: An Anthology*, Peter Neagoe pictured the American expatriate in Europe as a figure in revolt against the tyranny of ‘standardization’—‘a foe subtler than old age and the middle class, but no less oppressive and insidious’.²² Yet the ‘American in Paris’, often an affluent bohemian running from prohibition and boosterism to a Paris of cognac and catacombs, was greeted with ‘Américanisme’, manifested as enthusiastic interrogation about movies, mass production and skyscrapers. In the 1934 study *Exile’s Return: A Narrative of Changing Ideas*, Malcolm Cowley characterized the voyage to Europe as an ‘escape’, although he asserted that this was not a pejorative judgment—the expatriates were ‘fleeing from an enemy that seems too powerful too attack’.²³ For Cowley, as the title of one of his chapters stated, there would be ‘no escape’.

Yet, even as many Americans travelled to Russia, Paris remained of great importance as a gateway into Europe and beyond, just as Berlin represented a gateway to the East—when Lozowick travelled to Moscow in 1922, he passed through Paris but resided mostly in Berlin. If a ‘Paris-centric’ narrative is countered in this thesis, then Berlin has a curious role. Much of the early information about the USSR and Constructivism came to the USA via Germany, carried by figures such as J. B. Neumann, Katherine Dreier, Lozowick, Boris Aronson, the editors of *Broom* (which was based in Berlin for a time) and Kiesler. From Berlin Dada to Brecht’s barbed satire, ‘Amerikanismus’ was ubiquitous in Weimar culture, and was the site of numerous angry debates.²⁴ Yet Berlin’s geographic proximity to Russia and the socialist politics of many

²² Peter Neagoe ‘Foreword’ in Peter Neagoe, ed., *Americans Abroad: An Anthology*, The Hague: Service Press, 1932, pp. x.

²³ Malcolm Cowley *Exile’s Return: A Narrative of Ideas*, New York: Viking Press, 1934, pp. 229.

²⁴ See Beeke Sell Tower, ‘“Ultramodern and Ultraprimitive”: Shifting Meanings of Americanism in the Art of Weimar Germany’, in T. W. Kniesche and S. Brockman,

of the German avant-garde, from Hannah Höch to Hannes Meyer, meant that the Soviet Union rivalled America in the German cultural imagination. However Germany did not occupy the American cultural imagination as much as Russia (until the rise of Hitler perhaps), although many of its cultural products, especially its films and architecture, were widely discussed in American cultural journals. Between America and Russia, and with a vestigial link to French culture, the German cultural world of the 1920s and early 1930s has an important intermediary role in this discussion.

Therefore, New York and Paris were not just cities at the beginning and end of a transatlantic voyage but points on a cultural map that stretched potentially from Mexico to Moscow. This journey was not necessarily a literal one, undertaken by any numbers of individuals (although the Mexican Diego Rivera did travel to Moscow in 1927, and Eisenstein filmed in Mexico in the early 1930s), but existed rather as a network of exchanges in the various 'little magazines' of the day. It was, essentially, the international span of Modernism and was most effectively generated and sustained by the shipping of magazines, such as *The Little Review*, *Broom*, *transition*, *The Transatlantic Review*, and *Close Up* across the Atlantic, in international exhibitions, such as the 1925 Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris, the Machine-Age Exposition, and Film und Foto in Stuttgart in 1929.

An aim of this thesis, therefore, is to assert a rival transatlantic to the predominant New York-Paris myth. The Franco-American transatlantic is not erroneous, but through over-determination it has obscured another important cultural flow—the chequered interconnections between the USA and the USSR discussed here. However, there were many other 'transatlantics'. The complex and fraught history of what Paul Gilroy has termed the 'black transatlantic' lies outside of the scope of this thesis.²⁵ Likewise, the equally complex Iberian-Latin American transatlantic, Anglo-American transatlantic etc (not to mention transpacific or transcontinental exchanges) should be noted, but here are not considered.

eds., *Dancing on the Volcano: Essays on the Culture of the Weimar Republic*, South Carolina: Camden House Inc, 1994; Mary Nolan, *Visions of Modernity: American Business and the Modernization of Germany*, Oxford University Press, 1994.

²⁵ See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London: Verso, 1993.

There is a dearth of material on the USA-USSR transatlantic in both synthetic studies and monographs relating to specific cultural disciplines. Alan M. Ball's *Imagining America: Influence and Images in Twentieth-Century Russia* is an excellent analysis that captures the complexity of Amerikanizm in Russia during the period and beyond. Richard Pells's *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years*, Paul Hollander's *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba, 1928-1978*, and David Caute's *The Fellow Travellers: Intellectual Friends of Communism* are important accounts of the American imagining of Russia by radicals and fellow travellers. There have been a handful of specific cultural studies. Vladimir Petric's 1973 doctoral study (at New York University) of the dynamic interactions between the American and Russian film practices, 'Soviet Revolutionary Films in America (1926-1936)' stands alone as an extended analysis, highlighting the need for similar monographs on theatre, literature, fine art, graphic arts, and architecture. There have been many valuable articles, such as Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt's 'Louis Lozowick: An American Assimilation of Russian Avant-Garde Art of the 1920s' in the useful volume *Avant-Garde Frontier: Russia Meets the West, 1910-1930*, Dickran Tashjian's 2006 '“A Big Cosmic Force” Katherine Dreier and the Russian/ Soviet Avant-Garde', and David Kadlec's 'Early Soviet Cinema and American Poetry' of 2004.²⁶ There have also been contributions made in books that are indirectly concerned with the subject. Susan Noyes Platt's *Modernism in the 1920s: Interpretations of Modern Art in New York from Expressionism to Constructivism* includes an informative, if anodyne, survey of the introduction of Russian art into America. The American communist imagination of Soviet Russia is a constant thread of studies of radical cultural practice, such as Andrew Hemingway's *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the CPUSA, 1926-1956*, Russell Campbell's *Cinema Strikes Back! Radical Filmmaking in the United States, 1930-42*,

²⁶ Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, 'Louis Lozowick: An American Assimilation of Russian Avant-Garde Art of the 1920s' in Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt and Gail Harrison Roman, eds., *Avant-Garde Frontier: Russia Meets the West, 1910-1930*, University Press of Florida, 1992; Dickran Tashjian, '“A Big Cosmic Force” Katherine Dreier and the Russian/ Soviet Avant-Garde' in Jennifer R. Gross, ed., *The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America*, Yale University Press, 2006; David Kadlec, 'Early Soviet Cinema and American Poetry', *Modernism/ Modernity*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2004.

William Alexander's *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931-1932*), and Ira A. Levine's *Left-Wing Dramatic Theory in the American Theatre*, David Aaron's *Writers on the Left*, and James Murphy's *The Proletarian Moment: The Controversy over Leftism in Literature*.

There have also been some worthwhile studies of the cultural impact of the machine age in America. Alongside excellent illustrations, the essays in *The Machine Age in America, 1918-1941* provide a fine survey of the subject. Dickran Tashjian's *Skyscraper Primitives*, a study of the little magazines, Jeffery Meikle's *Twentieth Century Ltd: Industrial Design in America, 1925-1929*, the exhibition catalogue *Precisionism in America 1915-1941: Reordering Reality*, Karen Lucic's *Charles Sheeler and the Cult of the Machine*, and Karen Tsujimoto's *Images for America: Precisionist Painting and Modern Photography* are also of note as sustained attempts to address an oddly neglected area of American art history.

Perhaps the most incisive study of this area is Terry Smith's 1993 *Making The Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America*. Smith looks at a broad field of practice—from the Ford Company's car plants to Diego Rivera's murals—beyond the interwar period in a sophisticated synthetic analysis of the incorporation of Modernism in America, and conversely the powerful role of Modernism in a 'visual order which organizes seeing in particular ways' to contribute to a 'regime of truth', a profoundly ideological process.²⁷ Likewise, the 'Amerika Machine' construct in this thesis concerns an abstract model—the machine aesthetic—that cultural forms coalesce around, and that functioned ideologically as an ordering, regulating, rationalizing device. There is also some shared material—Charles Sheeler, Bourke-White, Lewis Hine, Albert Kahn, and Evans are discussed in my project, although, Evans aside, these figures are peripheral to my narrative. The discussion of the process of incorporation of Modernism in my first chapter is indebted to Smith's argument, although Smith is almost entirely concerned with American practice contained in America, albeit including Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo's American commissions. If the greater majority of work discussed here falls

²⁷ Terry Smith, *Making The Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America*, University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 7.

outside the scope of Smith's book, then the emphasis on the international movement of forms and ideas is also distinct.

Michael Leja has noted that 'Smith's text is insistently dialectical, constantly acknowledging contradictions and tensions, notably the strong backward-looking tendency that is an integral component of modernizing discourses'.²⁸ In the present study, a dialectical analysis finds that the machine aesthetic was a paradox, inherently riven with contradictions—whether old and new, communist or capitalist, spiritual or scientific, abstract or figurative, equivalent or specific, or merely American and Russian. Thus whilst the machine was imagined as a unifying motif, it was instead a site of conflict, rendering it curiously resistant to meaning. Indeed, the analysis in this thesis is driven by the notion that no cultural product can have a unitary meaning, that each and every sign contains within it an inner contradiction that frustrates any singular ideological message, but that art works, and products of visual culture in general, are nonetheless engaged in ideological struggles and are appropriated for ideological purposes.

In this thesis, the 'Amerika Machine' refers to the broad discursive and visual formations that criss-crossed the transatlantic like a shuttle weaving complex linear and geometric patterns. The aim here is to unpick some of the stitches or (mixing metaphors) to examine some of the circuits that make up a matrix of modernity. Ultimately this is an historical rather than theoretical study—it involves an archaeological examination of a specific milieu within a particular historical moment, a sifting of the fragments of a neglected area of American cultural history. Yet it addresses an abstraction, the machine aesthetic, and a discursive formation, the America/Amerikanizm nexus, that were quotidian yet chimerical, simultaneously transcending lived experience whilst remaining intractable from it, existing in intellectual and artistic imaginations yet emanating from systems of production that controlled the real working conditions of millions of people, from the American engineer to the Tajik tractor driver.

In a literal sense, the tractor in Lozowick's lithograph was an 'Amerika Machine', whether American manufactured or Soviet built with an American know-

²⁸ Michael Leja, Review of *Making The Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America*, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 81, No. 1, June 1994, p. 315.

how, it was a product of American technology. It also represented a system of social management geared to modernization. Constructed on an assembly line, this ‘Amerika Machine’ was a product of Fordist and Taylorist systems of production, but also a machine for producing Amerikanizm—agriculture would be transformed from the antiquated feudal estates and smallholdings to the modern, massive, and scientific American-style farms by the intervention of the tractor. Symbolically and literally, it signified technology, efficiency, and success.

Yet, the ‘Amerika Machine’ also refers to a narrative of failure. Beyond the inadequacy of the machine as a signifier, most of the artists and authors referred to here largely failed to find an audience, and have since fallen into obscurity (the chief exception was Walker Evans, yet his career is often reduced to the five slim years from 1935). In one sense, the Amerika Machine refers to a blind spot, a collective inability to comprehend that the machine in America and Russia might not be benign. It refers ultimately to the eventual failure of the Soviet experiment and the millions lost in the terrors of Stalinism, especially those crushed by collectivization. As Moshe Lewin put it, although there were 29,000,000 kolkhoz members by 1939, numbering 46.1% of the population, there ‘was nothing collective’ about collectivization.²⁹ Thus, whilst Lozowick’s *Collective Farmer* might reflect some of the tensions of collectivization, it elides the extent of damage reaped in the transformation of the countryside. Collectivization in Tajikistan was deeply unpopular, although greater afflictions were suffered by its neighbour Kazakhstan, where through the conjoined horrors of famine and ‘dekulakization’ the population fell from 3,963,300 in 1929 to 3,100,900 in 1936.³⁰ Nevertheless, Tajikistan witnessed the revival of the ‘Basmachi’ (brigands), the resisters

²⁹ Moshe Lewin, *The Soviet Century*, Gregory Elliott, ed., London: Verso, 2005, p. 68.

³⁰ Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow, Soviet Collectivization and the Terror Famine*, London: Pimlico, 1986, p. 190. ‘Dekulakization’ referred to the imprisonment, execution, or just confiscation of land of kulaks—peasants with larger holdings who were especially resistant to sovietization. According to Roy Medvedev, more often than not a kulak was a peasant with a slightly more possessions than the poorest farm worker, and that the majority of so-called kulaks were just peasants opposed to collectivization. In one instance a peasant in a one room hut occupied by a large family was arrested for owning an old-fashioned trunk. See Roy Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*, George Shriver, ed. and trans., Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 211-255 for a discussion on the ‘mistakes and crimes’ of collectivization.

of Soviet rule who had been snuffed out by 1925 but who now reappeared as violent opponents of collectivization. They would traverse Central Asia in groups of up to 500, stealing livestock and attacking collective farms—their anger was focused on the enforced transformation of their way of life, particularly on the demolition of their equine culture.³¹ A symbol of hope, the tractor was equally a cipher of an emerging terror.³²

As Jerry F. Hough points out, ‘the history of the Soviet Union cannot be limited to a history of the regime’s censorship policy and its purges’.³³ This is not a history of the USSR or the USA, but an analysis of the projections, impressions, representations, and interconnections concerning the machine of American artists and ideologues, fuelled by transatlantic cultural traffic. If the Amerika Machine was a site of both ideological control and resistance, then the potency of that resistance is too easily forgotten. In 1932, members of the Workers Film and Photo League captured the sharp end of Ford’s capitalist nirvana in *Ford Massacre*, a particularly engrossing documentary film on the crushing of a strike and the murder of four strike leaders. But then Ford had always understood the underlying forces of the machine age with a blunt pragmatism that many of the protagonists discussed here did not share:

the source of material civilization is developed power. One way to use this power is through the machine, and just as we often think of the automobile as a thing in itself instead of as a way of using power, so also do we think of the machine as something in

³¹ Sheila Fitzpatrick reports that in 1928 there were 33 million horses in the USSR, in 1934 there were 15 million. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin’s Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization*, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 138.

³² Exact figures will always be ineluctable, especially when drawn from official censuses, but Robert Conquest estimates that between 1930 and 1937 11 million peasants died through famine (c.1.5 million died in Kazakhstan, c.5 million died in the famine in the Ukraine of 1932-33, 1 million in the North Caucasus, 1 million elsewhere, c. 3.5 million died in the ‘dekulakization’ programme), and a further million who had been arrested during that time died in prison camps after 1937. Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow*, p. 206.

³³ Jerry F. Hough, ‘The Cultural Revolution and Western Understanding’, in S. Fitzpatrick, ed., *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931*, Indiana University Press, 1978, p. 242.

itself instead of as a method of making power effective. We speak of a “machine age”. What we are entering is the power age.... the machine is only an incident.³⁴

³⁴ Henry Ford, in collaboration with Samuel Crowther, *Today and Tomorrow*, London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1926, p. 167.

CHAPTER ONE

From the Machine-Age Exposition to Machine Art: from International Constructivism to the International Style.

‘We killed the avant-garde by making it a garde. The avant-garde cannot exist if it is a garde; it cannot exist apart from comedians and mountebanks and poets; it cannot thrive as a hobby of the bourgeoisie’.

Philip Johnson, 1997.¹

In February 1929, the communist journal *New Masses* printed a piece entitled ‘Machine Art is Bourgeois’, a pithy critique of the aesthetic that had been ubiquitous throughout the decade. The author, a now forgotten radical named Pauline Zutringer, complained that ‘the machine artist as well as the jazz composer are not serving the cause of the working masses, they are the opportunists in the world of art’.² These artists failed to glorify the worker sufficiently. She singled out Louis Lozowick, an artist who ‘draws pretty machines’, claiming that he did not differ from other modernist artists, such as Georgia O’Keefe, who ‘serve an “enlightened” bourgeoisie’.³ A terse response from Lozowick, printed below Zutringer’s piece, dismissed such ‘unsolicited heroicization of the worker’ and admonished her for not allowing that ‘art has its own specific problems of importance for the artist and the worker’ and for ‘making flying excursions into sociology and aesthetics’.⁴ Importantly, he defended machine art by

¹ Philip Johnson and Jeffrey Kipnis, ‘A Conversation Around the Avant-Garde’, in Robert Somol, ed., *Autonomy and Ideology: Positioning the Avant-Garde in America*, New York: The Monacelli Press, 1997, p. 43.

² Pauline Zutringer, ‘Machine Art is Bourgeois’, *New Masses*, February 1929, p. 31.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Louis Lozowick, *ibid.*

arguing the ‘paramount importance of machinery and technique in the achievement of the revolution and its functioning of the new society [sic]’.⁵

Two years previously, *New Masses* had printed a similar debate on ‘That Monster—the Machine’, between the radical poet Genevieve Taggard and the liberal ideologue Lewis Mumford. Bemoaning Leftist adulation of the machine, Mumford had pointed out that:

half the marvels of the Machine Age which they accept so gratefully are products of the business system: and the only purpose they fulfil is that of usury and exorbitant gain. The skyscraper is perhaps the chief fetish of the revolutionary boys and girls; they talk as if our only hope for a lively modern architecture were in the building of skyscrapers.⁶

The catalyst for this debate was Taggard’s review of the recent Machine-Age Exposition, an exhibition organized by Jane Heap of *The Little Review* (with assistance from Lozowick), which had idealized the machine as the principle motif of modernity, and illustrated this concept with juxtapositions of works of art and industry. As Director of the Museum of Modern Art Alfred H. Barr Jr remembered in the foreword to the catalogue of 1934 exhibition *Machine Art*:

the romantic attitude toward the machine reached its height in America about five years ago. The Machine-Age Exhibition [sic]...was an important pioneer effort which included fantastic drawings of the city of the future, “modernistic” skyscrapers, constructivists, robot costumes, theatre settings, and factories, together with some excellent machines and photographs of machinery.⁷

Unlike the successful *Machine Art* show, the Machine-Age Exposition was barely attended at the time and passed quickly into obscurity. Yet it was an important instance in the intersection of the American and Soviet avant-gardes. In particular, it was the first major examination of the machine aesthetic in America. It was the first exhibition to feature Soviet architecture, and the first to be engaged thematically with the principles

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Louis Mumford, ‘That Monster—The Machine: The Bourgeois Girls Like Their Ham Sliced Thin’, *New Masses*, September 1927, p. 23.

⁷ Alfred H. Barr, ‘Foreword’, *Machine Art*, ex. cat., New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1934, non-paginated.

and forms of Constructivism. When Heap claimed that the exhibition witnessed a union of the artist and the engineer, her rhetoric was partly derived from Constructivism, although other influential sources ensured that her embrace of the movement was limited and apolitical.⁸ This chapter charts the chequered introduction of Constructivism into America, where it emerged in the 1920s as ‘machine art’.

In a previous account, I argued that the Machine-Age Exposition presented an eclectic, inchoate version of Modernism that would later be ironed out by the nascent MoMA, particularly in two celebrated exhibitions, the Modern Architecture: International Exhibition of 1932 and Machine Art.⁹ If MoMA coalesced disparate strands of practice into a cogent narrative, then this synthesis had previously been attempted in the Machine-Age Exposition catalogue, where a utopic machine aesthetic encapsulated the work and the essays. Yet if the machine aesthetic at this exhibition glossed over disparities in claims made for the machine, in relation to political and spiritual discourses, then in conceiving the ‘International Style’ of architecture, the ideologues at MoMA, an affluent and ambitious group known as the ‘Harvard circle’, divorced the work from any such associations presenting an essentially formalist narrative whilst concurrently adopting corporate marketing techniques in its exhibition and publication programmes. These were stages in the incorporation of Modernism, where it seemed that any critical position particular to the European avant-garde was diluted, and a weaker, more easily digestible brew was served up to an eager, if uninformed patron class in America. The conclusion was that the Machine-Age Exposition was a keynote moment in this mutation whereby the novelty of Modernism ultimately equated the novelty of the commodity.

On further inspection it appears that this formulation needs substantial reworking in parts, and extended exploration of some of the themes indicated. Firstly, there is a greater examination here of the interim moments between the Machine-Age Exposition and the later Machine Art exhibition, including several important publications, exhibitions, and actual buildings. I discuss the Machine-Age Exposition with more

⁸ Jane Heap, ‘Machine-Age Exposition’, *The Little Review*, Spring 1922, p. 22.

⁹ Barnaby Haran, ‘“Plastic-Mechanical Analogies”: The Machine-Age Exposition, New York 1927’, MA Dissertation, Department of History of Art, University College London, 2002.

emphasis on exchanges between artists, architects, and ideologues from the USA and the USSR, often mediated in Germany. Inherent problems in the notion that the politics of the avant-garde dissipated on its westerly course will be more closely assessed in the chapter that covers the photographs of Ralph Steiner and Walker Evans and the coincidence of technological imagery in American, German, and Russian photography. In this chapter, I am more concerned with the sporadic and uneven introduction of Constructivism into the United States, from its arrival in Europe and passage over the transatlantic, how its forms were reconceived in America, and how their easy availability for appropriation for the corporate world might indicate fragility in the original conception.

In contrast to the rash of claims made at the Machine-Age Exposition, the International Style was apparently devoid of significance beyond pragmatic, specific concerns relating to form and structure. Despite its supposed invisibility, it was nonetheless ideological. As a concept that transformed the social content and utopianism of modernist architecture into formal relations, coalesced around a uniform rubric of style, it aligned such architecture with corporate interests, whilst masking over any awkward political associations or any possible social divisions. At the same, it illuminated the openness of Modernism to such distortion. As Fredric Jameson, paraphrasing Manfredo Tafuri, puts it:

the new utopianism of high Modernism...unwittingly and against the spirit of its revolutionary and utopian affirmations prepared the terrain for the omnipotence of the fully “rationalized” technocratic plan, for the universal planification of what was to become the total system of multinational capital.¹⁰

So beyond the view that ‘revolutionary’ architectural and design programmes were converted in the United States into a business ideology by the MoMA ideologues, and that a revolution in architecture was lost to the hegemony of the International Style, it is possible that such utopianism was incipiently fragile. The progenitors of the International Style unwittingly identified a common element in the machine aesthetic that lay beneath the revolutionary, spiritual, and philosophical claims—a mute, neutral

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, ‘Architecture and the Critique of Ideology’, in Joan Ockman, ed., *Architecture, Criticism, Ideology*, Princeton Architectural Press, 1985, p. 78.

style that was a matrix of capitalist modernity, the analogue of technological 'Américanisme', 'Amerikanismus' and 'Amerikanizm'. Seeking universality, the Machine-Age Exposition anticipated the International Style, but retained a utopian machine aesthetic that drew in many competing factions.

The Machine-Age Exposition was first suggested in the Spring 1925 issue of *The Little Review* by co-editor Jane Heap. She announced an exhibition that 'will show actual machines, parts, apparatuses, photographs and drawings of machines, plants constructions, and inventions by the most vital of modern artists'.¹¹ The aim was to achieve a 'plastic-mechanical analogy' through the juxtaposition of these objects, a synthesis of art and industry that would reflect Heap's notion that 'the machine is the religious expression of today'.¹² For Heap the machine aesthetic represented a 'new creative force' that was 'forecasting the life of tomorrow'.¹³ Yet the exhibition itself was the culmination of several years of discussion on the machine.

The Little Review had been founded in Chicago in 1914 by Margaret Anderson to celebrate the formal experiments of Modernism, but was initially a literary journal with appended coverage of the arts. Heap, who was for many years Anderson's lover, joined the magazine in 1916 and gradually introduced more modernist fine art. *The Little Review* achieved considerable notoriety in 1922 when the editors were charged with obscenity for publishing extracts of James Joyce's *Ulysses*.¹⁴ With Heap's growing influence, especially from 1924 when Anderson abdicated from running the magazine, there was a greater emphasis on visual art and especially work by the European avant-garde. In 1922, she engaged Francis Picabia to guest edit an issue of the magazine.

¹¹ Heap, 'Machine-Age Exposition', p. 22.

¹² Ibid. She borrowed the term 'plastic-mechanical analogy' from the an essay by the Italian Futurist Enrico Prampolini, 'The Aesthetic of the Machine and the Mechanical Introspection in Art', which appeared in *The Little Review*, Autumn-Winter 1924-5, and was reprinted in the exhibition catalogue. It was originally published in *Broom*, October 1922.

¹³ Ibid, p. 22 and p. 24.

¹⁴ A disastrous defence by the art collector and lawyer John Quinn, whose romantic ambitions towards Anderson were replaced by moral outrage on discovery of her lesbianism, nearly saw the closure of the magazine. See Holly Baggett 'The Trials of Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap', in Susan Albertine, ed., *A Living of Words: American Women in Print Culture*, University of Texas, 1995.

From the early 1920s onwards *The Little Review* focused increasingly on machine art, yet Heap synthesized its variations and presented the magazine as beyond tribalism: [it] ‘surpasses ALL...includes ALL...outlives ALL isms...Cubism, Impressionism, Futurism, Unaninism, Neo-classicism, Ultraism, Imagism, Vorticism, Dadaism, Simultaneism, Expressionism...all’.¹⁵ Elsewhere, she boasted that *The Little Review* had pioneered the introduction of ‘work by French, German, Italian and Russian...Cubists, Expressionists, Dadaists, Expressionists, Futurists, Constructivists, etc’.¹⁶ Above all, the latter group informed her conception of machine art. Heap first indicated an influence of Constructivism in the winter 1922 issue when she reproduced Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* and argued that ‘the ‘artist...must affiliate with the creative arts in other arts, and with constructive men of his epoch; engineers and scientists etc. In this way the artist would fulfil a ‘social function’.¹⁷ In the spring 1924 issue, Heap was more direct about this social function in a short piece on ‘The Russian Constructivists’. She wrote:

here is a group of men who have broken with painting and sculpture and have become engineers of art. They take the materials of industry: steel, wood, paper, coal, glass... They study the weight, texture and psyche of each material and then treat it with a precision, organization, and balance which produces “constructions” which indicate that there is a necessity for change in the outside aspect of the world.¹⁸

Heap reproduced the work of El Lissitzky, Naum Gabo, and Nathan Altmann. With the exception of Lissitzky’s ‘Book Illustration’ (*Tatlin at Work*, 1922, an illustration for Ilya Ehrenburg’s *Six Tales with Easy Endings*), the work remained within the bounds of painting and sculpture, and did not represent the rich graphic and photographic work of the Constructivists in Russia, although Heap did mention ‘Stenberg’ and ‘Kliutzius’ (clearly referring to either Vladimir or Georgii Stenberg, and Gustav Klutsis, the pioneers of Soviet graphic work and photomontage).¹⁹

¹⁵ ‘The Little Review is Immortal’, publicity notice, LRP, Box 4, Folder 1, undated, non-paginated.

¹⁶ ‘What *The Little Review* has Done’, L.R.P., Box 4, Folder 1, undated, non-paginated.

¹⁷ jh (Jane Heap), ‘Independents, etc.’, *The Little Review*, Winter 1922, p. 22.

¹⁸ jh (Jane Heap), ‘Comments’, *The Little Review*, Spring 1924, p. 57.

¹⁹ Ibid.

There were some disparities between the conception of the original model and Heap's understanding of the term. In Russia Constructivism was celebrated as 'the Communist expression of material constructions', whereas Heap's version, as she explained in 1925 'Machine-Age Exposition' article, saw these ideas concentrated in 'a great new race of men in America: the Engineer', who '...has created a new mechanical world'.²⁰ Thus, Heap's 'social function' was not politically motivated and would not be in conflict with 'the legitimate pursuit of the Western World [which] has been the acquisition of wealth, enjoyment of the senses, and commercial competition'.²¹ Heap's version relocated aspects of Russian Constructivism into an American context, and was crystallized in her encounter with an International Constructivist.

In 1925, Heap visited the Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes (International Exhibition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts) in Paris where she met Frederick Kiesler, a member of De Stijl, stage designer, architect, theorist, and the organizer of the Internationale Ausstellung neuer Theatertechnik (International Exposition of New Theatre Technique) in Vienna in 1924. Impressed by Kiesler's contributions to the Austrian section, which included large-scale pieces such as *City in Space* and *Space Stage* as well as the overall design of the display, Heap persuaded him to bring the theatre exhibition to New York. As a result the proposed Machine-Age Exposition was postponed in favour of the International Theatre Exposition of February 1926. With over 1,500 exhibits, featuring work from eighteen countries, including an appended American section curated by Robert Edmund Jones, the International Theatre Exposition was a peerless showcase in America of experiments in theatre design. The show, which was well publicized and generally well received, is discussed in Chapter Two, suffice to say that with over forty Soviet artists represented it was the largest display of Russian Constructivism in the United States to date.

Heap and Kiesler appear to have parted company after the exhibition, possibly due to the latter's disappointment with the modest reach of *The Little Review's* operations, at least there were no more collaborations (their last known association was

²⁰ Alexei Gan, 'From *Constructivism*', 1922, trans. John Bowlit, in Stephen Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism*, New York: Viking Press, 1974, p. 39. Heap, 'Machine-Age Exposition', p. 22.

²¹ Heap, *ibid.*

their joint membership of the Film Associates Inc, which was launched in October 1926). Heap's next project was a similar exhibition that would cover developments in contemporary architecture. An undated circular with the heading 'International Exposition of New Systems of Architecture' heralded 'an exposition showing the most recent developments in new systems of building, city plans, urbanism, time space construction—by the most vital architects in America, Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Poland, Russia, etc—organized by The Little Review'.²² As the circular states that the closing date for entrants was 14 February 1927, one can assume that plans for this exhibition began after the International Theatre Exposition. A letter from Louis Lozowick to Heap dated 6 February, in which he promised to 'be one of the most enthusiastic rooters for the Architectural Show', further suggests that until February 1927 Heap's plan was to follow the theatre show with a similar treatment of architecture—an idea perhaps conceived in tandem with Kiesler, given the similarity of the title to his 1924 Vienna exhibition.²³

By March 1927, Heap had returned to the Machine-Age Exposition, perhaps a consequence of her recent parting from Kiesler. An invitation to prospective members of a general committee, dated 18 March now proposed 'an exposition showing the most recent developments in architecture, engineering and industrial arts...as related to one another in this time' which would run from 25 April to 14 May at the Scientific American Building on West 40 Street.²⁴ The architectural show was thus reconceived as a more general survey of machine art, although it was at this stage still focused on the products of industry. Nevertheless, the practical considerations of the architecture exhibition were dissolved into a broader rhetoric redolent of the 1925 'Machine-Age Exposition' article (again, this may reflect differing authorship yet it is nonetheless emblematic of a change in intention). In the circular for the International Exposition of New Systems of Architecture, the 'President American Exhibitors' (possibly Hugh

²² 'International Exposition of New Systems of Architecture', LRP, Box 2 Folder 5, undated, non-paginated.

²³ Louis Lozowick to Jane Heap, 6 February 1927, LRP, Box 8 Folder 16, non-paginated.

²⁴ Invitation to 'Machine-Age Exposition' committee, March 18 1927, LRP, Box 2, Folder 9, non-paginated.

Ferriss, rather than Heap) wrote that ‘the purpose of this exposition is to show the most recent developments in Architecture in all countries; to further the work of the modern architect; and to establish an international bond’.²⁵ In contrast, the tone of the new Machine-Age Exposition invitation was more in keeping with Heap’s article: ‘the purpose of this exposition is to create a better understanding of this Age; to show that our contributions to civilization are not entirely “materialistic” ’.²⁶

By the time some publicity materials were produced, the brief for the exhibition had expanded to reflect this shift in emphasis: ‘architecture, engineering, industrial arts, modern art...presented together for the first time in such a manner that the inter-relation-inter-influence will be shown and emphasized’ (this advertisement also proclaimed that a ‘Glass skyscraper designed by Hugh Ferriss will be a sensational feature’).²⁷ The inclusion of modern art was reflected in Lozowick’s poster for the show, which featured a *Machine Ornament*, an architectonic ink drawing of a machine part, and Léger’s catalogue cover, a *Machine Element* drawing of interlocking discs (Fig. 13 and Fig. 14). Lozowick’s poster and the exhibition flyer also specified the new date, 16 May to 28 May, and the new venue, 119 West 5 Street (Steinway Hall, where the International Theatre Exposition had been held the previous year).

The catalogue, which was also produced in advance and was thus incomplete, lacking the Russian section (which ‘will arrive too late to catalogue in detail’), was designed by Heap and was published as a supplement to the Spring/ Summer 1927 issue of *The Little Review*.²⁸ With nine essays and forty-five illustrations, the Machine-Age Exposition catalogue was a modest affair compared to that of the International Theatre Exposition. Indeed, the exhibition itself was much smaller than the theatre show, with 444 from seven countries as opposed to 1500 from eighteen countries. Nearly three

²⁵ ‘International Exposition of New Systems of Architecture’, op.cit.

²⁶ Invitation to ‘Machine-Age Exposition’ committee, op. cit.

²⁷ ‘Machine-Age Exposition’, LRP Box 2 Folder 9, undated, non-paginated.

²⁸ ‘Machine-Age Exposition Catalogue’, *The Little Review*, Spring/ Summer 1927, p .34. Amongst the co-organisers, it listed Heap and *The Little Review*, Louis van der Swaelmen and M. Gaspard of the Société des Urbanistes from Brussels, Professor Josef Frank of the Kunstgewerbeschule of Vienna, Szymon Syrkus of the Warsaw group Praesens, Hugh Ferriss, and the USSR Society of Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries ‘America Branch’.

hundred of these were architectural exhibits—models, drawings, or photographs—indicating the architectural origins of the exhibition, and these alone were organized by country, which implies that the architecture exhibition was mostly ready before the resurrection of the machine exhibition.

Yet despite the predominance of architecture, the most striking aspect of the Machine-Age Exposition was the diversity of objects on display and their juxtaposition. The machine was represented literally, by actual machines (such as a machine gun, a meat carver and a coffee grinder), by machine parts (such as temperature regulators, valves, and crankshafts), and by models and photographs of machines (such as aeroplanes and gas works). The machine was represented iconographically in exhibits such as Steiner's photographs, Lozowick's *Machine Ornaments*, and Alexandra Exter's robot costumes. It was invoked in the technique of paintings by Charles Demuth and Theo van Doesburg, sculptures by Archipenko, Anton Pevsner, and John Storrs, and decorations by Naum Gabo and Hans Arp. Many of the architectural exhibits were commercial and industrial buildings, from skyscrapers in New York, such as Raymond Hood's Radiator Building and Arthur Loomis Harmon's Shelton Hotel, to power plants in Germany and Russia. There were models and photographs of power plants, grain elevators, industrial boilers, airports, and car parks. Other architectural exhibits, including assorted private houses, apartment blocks, gardens, churches, theatres, and shops made reference to the machine through techniques and characteristics such as prefabrication and rejection of ornament.

Treatises on the machine aesthetic in the catalogue essays unified these assorted exhibits. Some of these had been published before, such as Heap, Prampolini and Archipenko's pieces, and were reprinted for their relevance to the exhibition. Archipenko's 'Machine and Art' essentially trumpeted his own status as a pioneer of machine art. He cited a 'dangerous road', namely Futurism and Dadaism which failed to conjure the 'Epoch of Action' (his term for the machine age) and due to a focus on literal fragments of the machine ultimately belonged to the prosaic environs of 'the junk shop'.²⁹ The 'correct road' was 'Archipentura', defined as 'superior painting', which was 'inspired by the Einstein Theory of Relativity as well as by the ambience of the

²⁹ Alexander Archipenko, 'Machine and Art', *ibid*, p. 13.

most modern city of the world, New York'.³⁰ Meanwhile, Prampolini's text, which cited the machine as the 'tutelary symbol of the universal dynamism', reflected his involvement in the Italian Futurist movement.³¹ Yet, despite Archipenko's strategic admonitions, their position was similar. Whilst Archipenko proclaimed the mythic 'union of Art and Action' and Prampolini called for a 'plastic-mechanical analogy that the Machine suggests to us in connection with various spiritual realities', both were arguing against literal machine art in favour of work that invoked the spiritual dynamism of modern life.³²

The spiritual note in Prampolini's text recurred elsewhere in essays by Heap, Ferriss, and Mark Turbyfill. These were proponents of Theosophy, in particular the version espoused by the notorious G. I. Gurdjieff. Heap, who was the most ardent of the three, had discovered Gurdjieff's teachings at a lecture given by Alfred Orage, the former editor of the literary journal *New Age*, in December 1923. She visited Gurdjieff's headquarters at Fontainebleau on her trip to Europe in 1925, and following the collapse of *The Little Review* in 1929 abandoned cultural matters to dedicate her life to promoting his work. Her 1925 'Machine-Age Exposition' article was the most explicit example of her conjunction of the machine and the spiritual. Admonishing those who 'cry out at the Machine as the incubus that is threatening our "spiritual" life', Heap found instead a 'mysterious and necessary part of our evolution' which would be appreciated only by those 'who are alive; who have become impatient with the petrified copying of the dead and dying; who are interested in things dynamic'.³³ Heap saw the machine as a vital force that would destroy the static habitual patterns of a sleeping populace. However, Susan Noyes Platt writes that 'Heap slightly manipulated Gurdjieff's ideas to her own purpose: she made the machine the counterpart to the

³⁰ Ibid, p. 14.

³¹ Enrico Prampolini, 'The Aesthetic of the Machine and Mechanical Introspection in Art', *ibid*, p. 10. See Caroline Tisdall and Angelo Bozzolla, *Futurism*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1977. Tisdall and Bozzolla describe Prampolini as one of the lynchpins of the later manifestation of Futurism, which had originally been conceived by Filippo Marinetti in 1909.

³² Ibid.

³³ Heap, 'Machine-Age Exposition', p. 23.

cathedral as a manifestation of religious consciousness, whereas Gurdjieff stressed the underlying principles of the machine as a process of transformation'.³⁴

If the Machine-Age Exposition celebrated these spiritual claims for the machine, the catalogue contained some more technically concerned articles which related to the abandoned 'new systems of architecture' exhibition. André Lurçat's appraisal of 'French Architecture' (dated January 1926) and Frederick L. Keppler's 'Modern Glass Construction' were informative studies of issues in contemporary architecture and new construction techniques. Szymon Syrkus's 'Architecture Opens up Volume' (dated 1926) was clearly derived from Le Corbusier's writings, and the author celebrated Purism, alongside Suprematism and Cubism, as formal means for generating a 'new conception of space', whilst criticizing Constructivism for 'technical hypertrophy', whereby 'problems of form were neglected in favor of problems of pure technique'.³⁵

These essays reflected the split identity of the exhibition, as both a serious survey of contemporary architecture and a spiritual celebration of the machine. Lozowick's 'The Americanization of Art' belonged to neither camp. Rather, it was a mythic treatise on the immense achievements of American technology. Written in 1924 following a trip to Russia and Germany but unpublished until the Machine-Age Exposition, this essay was one of Lozowick's many contributions to the exhibition. He produced the poster, submitted an essay, spoke on Soviet architecture at a special 'Russian Night' at the exhibition, and contributed more work than any other artist, including twenty *Machine Ornaments*, several American city paintings, his Constructivist stage for the Chicago production of George Kaiser's *Gas*, and the backdrop for a fashion show and a window display for Lord's and Taylor department store. As a prominent committee member, Lozowick also helped in the general organization of the exhibition, although he later affirmed that Heap was 'really the head'.³⁶

³⁴ Susan Noyes-Platt, 'Mysticism in the Machine Age: Jane Heap and *The Little Review*, 20/1, Fall 1989, p. 89.

³⁵ Szymon Syrkus, 'Architecture Opens Up Volume', *Machine-Age Exposition*, op. cit., p. 30.

³⁶ Louis Lozowick, *Survivor from a Dead Age: The Memoirs of Louis Lozowick*, Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, ed., Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997, p. 113.

Although he was born in the Ukraine in 1892 and travelled to America in 1906, eventually becoming an American citizen, Lozowick saw himself as American and once complained to Heap for referring to him in *The Little Review* as a Russian artist.³⁷ In the essay, he wrote that the ‘intriguing novelty, the crude virility, the stupendous magnitude of the new American environment’ influenced the artist’s ‘attitude and the manner of his expression’ in ‘very subtly and in devious ways’.³⁸ Lozowick argued that source material was abundant in ‘the skyscrapers of New York, the grain elevators of Minneapolis, the steel mills of Pittsburgh, the oil wells of Oklahoma, the copper mines of Butte, the lumber yards of Seattle’, but the artist should not literally reproduce technological imagery, rather the art should represent the ‘essential character’ of the material.³⁹ The American city, for example, should be broken down into an array of forms found ‘in the verticals of its smoke stacks, in the parallels of its car tracks, the squares of its streets, the cubes of its factories, the arc of its bridges, the cylinders of its gas tanks’.⁴⁰ References to ‘standardization’, ‘equilibrium’, and ‘objectivity’ were complemented by two *Machine Ornaments* and photographs of a sixty inch ‘Superior McCully All Steel Gyratory Crusher’ and an industrial plant in Russia.

For Taggard, Lozowick’s contributions encapsulated the strengths of the Machine-Age Exposition. His work succeeded in ‘surpassing the actual cogwheels and crankshafts, and became with the Archipenkos the chief reason for not staying outside and riding on the elevated’.⁴¹ She first became aware of the exhibition after stumbling across ‘the familiar cockade of the Lozowick black and white announcing this exhibition’ poster ‘near the East River...in the dusty window of a print shop’.⁴² Indeed, Lozowick’s offer to Heap to act as a ‘rooter’ for the exhibition was pertinent, as Heap’s hopeful statement that ‘such extraordinary interest and enthusiasm have greeted this

³⁷ Louis Lozowick to Jane Heap, 6/1/1926, LRP Box 8, Folder 16, non-paginated.

³⁸ Louis Lozowick, ‘The Americanization of Art’, *Machine-Age Exposition*, op. cit., p. 18.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Genevieve Taggard, ‘The Ruskinian Boys See Red’, *New Masses*, July 1927, p. 18.

⁴² Ibid.

Exposition that we feel confident of its success and far-reaching significance' was unfortunately unduly optimistic, as the show received little coverage.⁴³

Taggard complained that the machines on display lacked dynamism:

if she couldn't get the engineers to rig up something in motion why didn't Jane Heap get Léger's movie, *Ballet Mechanic*[sic] and have some Antheil music playing in a little dark room? Is that too much to ask? Jane Heap is content with machine sculpture; but most people want machine dance or drama.⁴⁴

Indeed, she found the exhibition deficient as an exposition of the machine age:

Jane Heap talks such good sense in her catalogue, that her show should have been better. There could have been more guillotinesque, nearly noiseless meat-slicers from Dayton, more kitchen cabinets and Crane Valves; *more Machine Age*. After the show we went outside into a comparatively better show, the city of New York, mixed up with all the past, mixed as all art is in life—but superior to Miss Heap's show in two regards: first, there was more of it and second it was going.⁴⁵

Yet despite its testaments to modernity the Machine-Age Exposition itself was somewhat antiquated in its rationale, as 'most of us began inspecting the Machine Age about thirty years ago from Grandpa's knee where we had a good view of his gold-filled turnip watch'.⁴⁶ More recently, Barbara Zabel has argued that the exhibition was derivative. She notes that Heap's ideas 'have their genesis in the early years of the decade and even the century'.⁴⁷ Whilst it was innovative in several ways, outlined above, the conjunction of the machine with Modernism dated back several years, to the Futurist Manifesto in 1909, and appeared in New York with the work of Picabia, Duchamp, and Morton Schamberg. *Broom* and *The Little Review* had been discussing machine art since the early 1920s. The publicity materials featured 'the same machine design that we associate with the NEW MASSES, *Loony*, the *Pinwheel* programme and

⁴³ 'Invitation to General Committee', op. cit.

⁴⁴ Taggard, 'The Ruskinian Boys See Red', op. cit.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Barbara Zabel, 'Louis Lozowick and Technological Optimism of the 1920s', PhD Thesis. McIntire Department of Art, University of Virginia, 1978, p. 173.

every radical show in town', effectively a radical motif for the mid-1920s.⁴⁸ Taggard noted that the key areas of architecture belonged to the Americans, Germans, and Russians, but she argued that 'the Americans are better than the Germans, than the Russians, than the French, as far as the architecture goes', finding that many of the European designs barely indicated practical use: 'all around on the wall, drawings of those strangely named abstractions, the Ultimate Allowable Envelopes, black monoliths altered, altered again, and suddenly, a place to live. Thank God, they didn't look like the stills in *Metropolis*'.⁴⁹

In *The Arts*, Herbert Lippmann wrote that 'Germany, Russia, and the United States were the leading exhibitors quantitatively and, of these, the Germans showed the most consideration in design, the Russians were most extravagantly fantastic, and the Americans most "hard-boiled"'.⁵⁰ Yet the exhibition was uneven, as the 'allied fine arts were sketchily represented and it was in architecture only that the relationship between mechanical radicalism and emotional purism was extensively and precisely demonstrated'.⁵¹ He praised the appropriateness of Steinway Hall as a venue:

⁴⁸ Taggard, *The Ruskinian Boys See Red*, p. 18.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Herbert Lippmann, 'The Machine-Age Exposition', *The Arts*, June 1927, p. 325.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 326. Dickran Tashjian thinks that the Machine-Age Exposition was 'upstaged' by the Exposition of Art in Trade at Macy's department store, which ran from 2 May to 7 May 1927, featuring displays designed by Lee Simonson. Indeed, not only was this a more literal exhibition of machine-made textiles and decorations, it also had the publicity budget of a major department store, enjoying full-page advertisements in daily newspapers and radio broadcasts of lectures given at the exhibition by experts discussing issues of design. Heap's budget would have been considerably more modest. On 21 May, halfway through the exhibition, Charles Lindbergh landed the Spirit of St Louis on an airstrip near Paris, completing the first non-stop transatlantic flight. Although the exhibition had aeroplane propellers and a model of an airport, it suffered with all other minor events as entire newspapers were devoted to this marvel of the machine age for several days. Neither of these explanations is entirely satisfactory, and one can conclude that a combination of bad luck, poor organization, inadequate funds, a diminutive avant-garde audience, and a conservative mainstream audience led to the failure of the exhibition. See Dickran Tashjian, 'Engineering a New Art', in Richard G. Wilson, ed., *The Machine Age in America, 1918-1941*, ex. cat., New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1986, p. 234.

the setting of this exhibition itself had significant form. This was the unpainted white plaster finish of walls, columns, beams, girders, and floor slabs of an unpartitioned office floor of a common type of building erected for commercial renting. An amusing touch was the use of ordinary tin pails inverted as refractors in the place of lighting fixtures.⁵²

Lippmann also found that machines varied aesthetically and sometimes lacked interest in repose:

machines themselves, approached aesthetically, appear to resemble other works of art in that they are not always beautiful. Evidently sculpture and painting have the edge on machines as exhibition material in that they can look their best in a gallery, but the machine will look better on the job. It is interesting to have observed that photographs although static can look more dynamic than machinery itself when stationary. The high-tension wiring and typewriter keys photographed by Ralph Steiner showed this beautifully.⁵³

In the *New York Sun*, Henry McBride referred to the centrality of America in the machine aesthetic, and America's simultaneous ignorance of its most celebrated quality: 'most of the European "machine art" is really done with one eye on us, and here we sit "in the sun" complacently building the most perfect machines in the world and not only indifferent to the fact but almost unaware that we are at the same time providing the world with a new system of aesthetics'.⁵⁴ Also noting this disparity, Ralph Flint of the *Christian Science Monitor* celebrated an exhibition 'of unusual and timely interest', which was 'one of the first attempts in America to celebrate the wonders of the machine from an aesthetic point of view, although various cults and schools in Europe have long chanted the praises of this mechanical era'.⁵⁵ Flint wrote that 'the Futurists, the Constructivists, the Ultraists, etc, have waxed warm over the new tenets of their artistic faiths, celebrating the machine with elaborate bursts of declamation and issuing manifestos of remarkable complexity'.⁵⁶

⁵² Lippmann, 'The Machine-Age Exposition', p. 325.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 325.

⁵⁵ Ralph Flint, 'New York Art Notes', *Christian Science Monitor*, 31 May 1927, p. 7.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

The Machine-Age Exposition was praised as a unique opportunity to witness the latest developments in Soviet architecture. In the *New York Sun* it was revealed that:

for the first time in this country there is an exhibition of the new Russian architecture. It is not generally known that the Soviet government has in its employ established architects whose business it is to create designs and models for new cities. Moscow and Leningrad are actually being reconstructed so as to provide better working conditions for its citizens.⁵⁷

The *New York Times* concurred that this was the ‘first exposition in America to show a Soviet Russian section...[and] a complete survey of the architecture of Russia since the revolution’.⁵⁸ The article pointed out that whilst ‘all types of building are shown, from Hugh Ferriss’s *Glass Skyscraper* to a garage for 1000 automobiles...only vital work of the younger-men is shown—men who are experimenting with new forms, new uses of material, and new systems of building’.⁵⁹ The *New York Times* followed this notice with a longer article entitled ‘New Architecture Develops in Russia’, which was printed the day after the exhibition closed. The author noted that ‘present-day Russia, which has undergone political, social and economic transformations in the last ten years, is busily developing an entirely new art and architecture with modern industrial civilization as its basis’.⁶⁰ The models and photographs on display at the exhibition (a horizontal skyscraper and the garage for 1000 automobiles were cited) ‘constituted the first authentic evidence since the Revolution of how this vast upheaval has affected the architecture of the nation’.⁶¹ This article was especially important as the sole record of the talks hosted during the run of the exhibition. The ‘Russian Night’ featured lectures by Lozowick, Oliver Sayler on the influence of Russian theatre on architecture, drawing specifically on the Kamerny Theatre and Moscow Art Theatre, and B.W. Delgass of Amtorg Trading Corporation.

The Amtorg Trading Corporation and the American Society for Cultural Relations with Russia supplied photographs of Soviet industry, such as an image of giant boilers

⁵⁷ ‘New Russian Architecture is Shown Here’, *New York Sun*, 21 May 1927, p. 16.

⁵⁸ ‘French Designs for Small Homes’, *New York Times*, 22 May, 1927, p. 23.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ ‘New Architecture Develops in Russia’, *New York Times*, 29 May 1927, II, p. 1.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

and an aerial diagram of a factory. As the Russian section arrived too late for the catalogue, we know only that unspecified designs by ‘Melnikoff’ (Konstantin Melnikov), ‘Work of the Society “OSA”’ (Obedinenie sovremennykh arkhitekturov, Society of Contemporary Architects, founded 1925) and ‘Work of the Association “ASNOVA”’ (Assotsiatsiia novykh arkhitekturov, Association of New Architects, founded 1923) were on display (there were fifty Russian items in all). OSA was a Constructivist splinter group that left the ‘Rationalist’ Asnova in 1925, on the grounds that Asnova were Kantian formalists.⁶² There were six reproductions in the catalogue, four images of industrial sites, donated by Amtorg, and two architectural designs, including a drawing of Vesnin Brothers’ 1923 Labour Building, an Asnova Project, in Moscow (Alexander Vesnin was later a founder of OSA) (Fig. 15). K. Paul Zygas writes that until the 1927 OSA ‘Exhibition of Contemporary Architecture’, which had an international range including Max Taut, Gerrit Rietveld, and several Bauhaus members (including Walter Gropius and Hannes Meyer), Soviet Constructivist architecture differed from European avant-garde work. In Soviet architectural designs, there was greater use of signage, a ‘fascination with the skeleton frame’, ‘volumetric gymnastics’, evident in ‘polychromatic surfaces, highly articulated walls, exposed structures, displays

⁶² Asnova included Lissitzky, K. Melnikov, A. Ladovsky, and N. Dokucheyev. A statement that ‘the measure of Architecture is Architecture’ in their one-off publication *Izvestiya Asnova* in 1926 brought hostile criticism from the newly formed and considerably more politicized OSA, who in 1929 denounced the earlier group for promoting ‘the ideology of the decadent streak in Soviet architecture’. Both quotes from Anatole Kopp, *Town and Revolution: Soviet Architecture and City Planning, 1917-1955*, trans. Thomas Burton, London: Thames and Hudson, 1967, p. 76. OSA included M. Ginsberg, A. and L. Vesnin, and A. Burov. See also K. Paul Zygas, ‘OSA’s 1927 Exhibition of Contemporary Architecture: Russia and the West Meet in Moscow’, in Gail Harrison Roman and Virginia H. Marquardt, eds., *The Avant-Garde Frontier: Russia Meets the West, 1910-1930*, University Press of Florida, 1992, pp.102-125, and Catherine Cooke, ‘Professional Diversity and Its Origins’, in Andreas C. Papadakis, *The Avant-Garde: Russian Architecture in the Twenties*, London: Academy Editions, 1991, pp. 9-21. Nikolai Ladovsky of Asnova explained rationalism as the ‘economy of psychic energy in the perception of spatial and functional aspects of a building’ — in other words, a city’s architecture influenced its inhabitants psychologically and politically, and architecture was a rational means of engaging the masses and transforming society. Ladovsky quoted in Cooke, p. 14.

of mechanical equipment, and colliding volumes' (Fig. 16).⁶³ After 1927 and the impact of Bauhaus designs, there was a shift to the types of design formalized in Hitchcock and Johnson's International Style.⁶⁴

From the evidence of the *New York Times* article, Lozowick's talk addressed new Russian architecture and probably elided such fine distinctions. He stated that 'Russia is the biggest builder in the world...in Russia it is the entire state that is trying to rebuild the country. The Government has plans for the great cities, plans for workers' housing, plans for rebuilding Moscow, and it is setting out to do all these things on a permanent, monumental basis'.⁶⁵ The uniqueness of Russian architecture was its marriage of the utilitarian and monumental, but Lozowick noted that the Russians lacked the technical know-how of the Americans and stressed the importance of American and Russian relations: 'in all such matters the Russians are avid for information coming from American architects. They are eager, for example, to get the benefit of American engineering experience regarding skyscraper foundations, and the stress and strain of gigantic structures'.⁶⁶ If American architects and engineers imparted their knowledge it 'would be their greatest contribution toward better cultural relations between the Soviet Union and the United States'.⁶⁷ This was reiterated by Delgass who invoked 'Amerikanizm', by stating that Russian architects saw America as 'the embodiment of the highest form of industrial development, the most significant illustration of the Machine Age in actual practice'.⁶⁸

If Soviet avant-garde culture drew from American technology, then the Machine-Age Exposition charted the new forms that spilled out of Russia into Europe and drifted sporadically over to America. As a paradigm Russo-American transatlantic, Lozowick was well equipped to comment on this phenomenon. In a 1929 study of Lissitzky, Lozowick made an important point about the resistance of Constructivism to translation. He wrote that 'when the interior decorators of Europe and America utilized the

⁶³ Zygas, 'OSA's 1927 Exhibition', p. 109.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 110.

⁶⁵ 'New Architecture Develops in Russia', op. cit.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

experiments with materials for purposes of ostentatious display, that is, for purposes directly contrary to the Constructivists original idea, the school was facing a crisis'.⁶⁹ Indeed, Lozowick registered an ultimate dissatisfaction with Constructivism: 'the Constructivists spoke with the most withering contempt of the "uselessness" of old art, but it did not take long for everyone, including the Constructivists themselves, to perceive that their own works were precisely the same kind of "useless" esthetic objects of no immediate practical value whatsoever'.⁷⁰ The critical note here was striking—alongside Harry Alan Potamkin and Max Eastman, Lozowick was rare amongst Leftist critics in presenting Soviet cultural work as fallible, and even attacking some of its aspects. More importantly, in contrast to the trope of a dissipation of political value of Constructivism in Europe and America, Lozowick argued that the corporate appropriation of it for fashion disrupted Constructivism at the core. The adaptability of Constructivism to commercial design, from the products of the Bauhaus to Lozowick's own designs for Lord and Taylor, and Kiesler's 1929 study *Contemporary Art Applied to the Store and its Display* indicated a weakness in Constructivism itself, revealing that its forms might not be intrinsically revolutionary and were dependent on context.⁷¹ As a style in Art and fashion, Constructivism risked becoming an entity that was potentially antithetic to its own purposes. At any event, by 1929 it had expired and its protagonists in Russia had dispersed. Whilst some artists carried on with their work regardless and 'others abandoned the experiments for semi-realism', Lissitzky dedicated himself to producing posters and exhibition catalogues 'as a socially useful member of a society in the process of a society in the process of creation'.⁷²

Given that between 1919 to 1920 America was engaged in purging itself of radical ideas, organizations, and activists, arresting and deporting large numbers of 'aliens' and 'undesirables', many of whom were Russian, it is not surprising that Soviet art was

⁶⁹ Louis Lozowick, 'El Lissitzky', *transition*, Fall 1929, p. 285.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ For an analysis of commercialism in Soviet Constructivism, see Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2005.

⁷² Ibid, p. 286.

introduced into the United States in essentially non-political terms.⁷³ An analysis of the passage of Russian art into the United States should indicate the extent of Americans' immediate knowledge and understanding of Russian Constructivism. Inevitably there will be some overlap with the chapters concerning theatre and film, and thus this chapter looks mostly at fine art and architecture. Secondly, a study of the development of International Constructivism, with special reference to the work of Kiesler, and the formulation of the 'International Style' should indicate how these forms were so easily adapted to the American context. In assessing the introduction of Russian art into the United States, it should be stressed that I am concerned entirely with art from the Soviet period. In the early 1920s, the most celebrated Russian avant-garde artist in America was Archipenko, who had settled in America in 1923 and was well known in New York for his connections with New York Dada, particularly through Duchamp's infamous 'Archie Pen Co' advertisement in *The Arts* in 1921.⁷⁴ Although Archipenko retained contact with the post-Revolutionary art world, his formal and philosophical formation was essentially pre-Revolutionary. In this sense, it is not 'Russianness' that is at stake here, but the importation of Soviet cultural work into America.

As Myroslava M. Mudrak and Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt have observed, the exportation of Soviet art coincided with the slackening of anti-Soviet measures by the American and European governments.⁷⁵ After the failure of the revolutions in Germany and Hungary it appeared to foreign powers that Socialism was contained within Russia. From 1921 onwards there was an increase in cultural relations, particularly between Germany and Russia. Lissitzky, who was fluent in German from his pre-war studies in Darmstadt, travelled that year to Warsaw and then on to Berlin, establishing contacts and initiating publications and organizations, starting with the foundation of the journal

⁷³ From 1917 to 1919 600 aliens were arrested, and sixty were deported. The worst of the Red Scare followed the Steel Strike of around Pittsburgh in September 1919. On December 21 1919, 249 'undesirables' were shipped out on the *Buford*, including the anarchists Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. Over the next few months about 6000 were arrested. Robert K. Murray, *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919-1920*, University of Minnesota Press, 1955, pp. 205-7.

⁷⁴ Marcel Duchamp, 'Archie Pen Co', *The Arts*, February-March, 1921.

⁷⁵ Myroslava M. Mudrak and Virginia H. Marquardt, 'Environments of Propaganda', in Roman and Marquardt, eds., *The Avant-Garde Frontier*, p. 68.

Veshch/ Gegenstand/ Objet, which was printed in Russian, German, and French. In the first issue (March-April 1922) Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenberg wrote a piece entitled 'The Blockade of Russia is Coming to an End'. They argued that the existence of the journal pointed to an 'exchange' between Soviet and Western European artists.⁷⁶ The authors referred to 'two adjacent lines of communication'.⁷⁷ In a sense, this was the founding document of International Constructivism, and their statement that 'art today is international, though retaining all its local symptoms and particularities' advocated an international exchange.⁷⁸

The tone was unmistakeably different from the pronouncements of the First Working Group of Constructivists, whose 1920 clarion was 'WE DECLARE WAR ON ART!'.⁷⁹ The death of art was loudly proclaimed in the understanding that art belonged to the bourgeoisie, and it was asserted that 'Marxists must work in order to elucidate its death scientifically and to formulate new phenomena of artistic labor within the new historic environment of our time'.⁸⁰ Christina Lodder writes that 'the term "Constructivism" arose in Russia during the winter of 1920-1 as a term specifically formulated to meet the needs of...new attitudes towards the culture of the future classless society'.⁸¹ Constructivism witnessed the meeting of 'abstract constructions in three dimensions with the ideology of Marxism and the constraints of industrial production'.⁸² Russian Constructivism referred to a range of activities, from the modernist constructions of Gabo and Antoine Pevsner to the more radical laboratory experiments of Alexander Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, and Alexei Gan. In the present study, it is the latter group who are equated with Constructivism. Gan wrote that 'Constructivism...arose in 1920 amid the "mass action" of leftist painters and ideologists'.⁸³ These figures aimed to eradicate the bourgeois traditions of art by

⁷⁶ El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenberg, 'The Blockade of Russia is Coming to an End', 1922, trans. S. Bann, reprinted in Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism*, p. 54.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 55.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Gan, 'From *Constructivism*', p. 35.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 36.

⁸¹ Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, Yale University Press, 1983, p. 3.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Gan, 'From *Constructivism*', p. 37

breaking down structures and reassembling the components as new constructions, according to an alignment of dialectical materialism with tectonic, textural constructions. If a new social order required a new cultural language, then ‘without art, by means of intellectual-material production, the Constructivist joins the proletarian order for the struggle with the past, for the conquest of the future’.⁸⁴

Lissitzky and Ehrenberg, in contrast, called for ‘an end to all declarations and counter-declarations!’, urging readers just to ‘make objects’.⁸⁵ The emphasis was on making connections, and the authors toned down political rhetoric in order not to alienate the potential audience. Therefore, they stated that ‘*Objet* stands apart from all political parties, since it is concerned with problems of art and not of politics’.⁸⁶ The aim was ‘strengthening ties between Russia, in the aftermath of the mighty Revolution, and the West, in its wretched Black Monday frame of mind; in doing so...bypassing all artistic distinctions, whether psychological, economic, or racial’.⁸⁷ Lodder has written that this moment marked the dilution of Constructivism: ‘depoliticized by their emigration to the West, Russian Constructivist experiments were viewed by the Germans solely within an aesthetic context’.⁸⁸ She specifically cites the non-utilitarian position of Gabo, who ignored the radical disparities between his own version of Constructivism and that of the First Working Group of Constructivists, serving to ‘camouflage the differences which existed in Russia between the constructive artist and the Constructivist’, an ‘identification which forced the West’s concept of Constructivism as an aesthetic’.⁸⁹ The event that encapsulated this process was the *Erste russische Kunstausstellung*, or First Exhibition of Russian Art, which was held at the van Diemen Gallery in Berlin in 1922. For Lodder, the 1922 van Diemen show facilitated the reception of Constructivism as an aesthetic development within, rather than a departure from, art. Yet, this was not, as Lodder generally overstates, due to

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 42.

⁸⁵ Lissitzky and Ehrenberg, p. 57.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 56.

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 55.

⁸⁸ Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 230.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

misunderstanding by Germans, but to its presentation by the Russians, as evident in the above quotes from Lissitzky and Ehrenberg.

Indeed, Sima Ingberman claims that the non-political presentation of Constructivism was deliberately managed to make the art more palatable, as a means of generating interest in the new society amongst European intellectuals. In his role as an emissary to promote Soviet art, Lissitzky was personally selected by Anatoli Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar of Education, to help those countries 'prepare for a communist takeover of Europe'.⁹⁰ As Ingberman argues, 'Lissitzky's ultimate goal was to unite architects and artists of many nationalities under the banner of Communism. Realizing that Communism was an intimidating word to many Europeans, he modified Communism to Constructivism, a term understood as artistic rather than political'.⁹¹ In his articles and lectures, such as the talk on 'New Russian Art' at the van Diemen show, Lissitzky softened the message of Constructivism in order to facilitate the eventual realization of the message itself. For Ingberman, Lissitzky downplayed Communism precisely to promote the Soviet Union.

At any rate, the van Diemen show was couched in non-political terms. The exhibition was the first dedicated display of the new art outside Russia and featured work by Lissitzky, Rodchenko, Gabo, Kazimir Malevich, and a model of the *Monument to the Third International* by Tatlin (Fig. 17). It also showed work dating back several years, by artists working in more traditional styles, such as Konstantin Yuon and Abram Arkhipov who drew largely from Impressionism and Cézanne, and expatriate modernists such as Archipenko.⁹² In the foreword to the exhibition, the curator David Shterenberg pointed out that 'during the blockade Russian artists tried to keep in touch with their Western counterparts by issuing proclamations and manifestos...but it is only with the present exhibition that the first real step has been taken to bring the two groups

⁹⁰ Sima Ingberman, *ABC: International Constructivist Architecture, 1922-1931*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1994, p. 4.

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 7.

⁹² Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 227.

together'.⁹³ One purpose of the exhibition was thus to connect the Soviet and Western avant-gardes. Shterenberg stressed that the Revolution had been accompanied by an assault on the 'dead, official... "high art"', which not only opened 'new avenues for Russia's creative forces' but also brought the artist out of the garret and closer to the people. In transforming the country, the Revolution demanded 'new forms of creation and construction'.⁹⁴

As Mudrak and Marquardt relay, the exhibition was not a commercial success, but was widely visited by the European avant-garde, further stimulating interest in Constructivism. Also in attendance were some Americans—Matthew Josephson, Katherine Dreier, and Lozowick (Boris Aronson, a Russian who would soon travel to America and who is discussed in Chapter Two, was an exhibitor). Dreier may well have been the first American to own Constructivist art when she purchased work by Lissitzky, Gabo, and Popova. As an exponent of Theosophy with an interest in revolutionary art rather than revolutionary politics, Dreier may have been encouraged by Arthur Holitscher's 'Statement', which made reference to the 'coming of the spiritual revolution', and discussed the Revolution in vaguely apocalyptic terms.⁹⁵

The exhibition received a baffled, occasionally hostile, critical response in the handful of English language journals that covered it, in articles which emphasized the novelty of the art with titles such as 'Queer Bolshevik Art in Berlin' and 'Berlin Sees Bizarre Russian Art Show'.⁹⁶ In the former article, the journalist celebrated the work of Gabo and Nathan Altmann, both of whom would be featured at the Machine-Age Exposition, whilst reporting that according to these artists 'entirely new forms were being produced under the revolution'.⁹⁷ Tatlin was referred to as a 'peculiar worker', although the journalist quoted Huntley Carter, the English expert on Russian theatre, who appraised the *Monument to the Third International* as 'one of the most astounding

⁹³ David Shterenberg, 'Foreword to the Catalogue of the First Exhibition of Russian Art, Van Diemen Gallery, Berlin 1922', trans. N. Bullock, in Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism*, p. 70.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Arthur Holitscher, 'Statement', 1922, in *ibid.*, p. 72.

⁹⁶ 'Queer Bolshevik Art in Berlin', *Arts and Decoration*, April 1923; Flora Turkel, 'Berlin Sees Bizarre Russian Art Show', *American Art News*, 4 November 1921.

⁹⁷ 'Queer Bolshevik Art in Berlin', *Arts and Decoration*, April 1923, p. 87.

architectural conceptions which has issued from the brain of a human being in modern times', despite resembling 'a skeleton tower of Pisa'.⁹⁸ The impact of the van Diemen exhibition on American art practice was not immediate, with the possible exception of Lozowick's *Machine Ornaments*, but was seminal as the moment Americans first encountered Constructivism.

There were, however, some minor exhibitions of Russian art in New York in the mid-Twenties. In 1923, Christian Brinton curated the Exhibition of Russian Painting and Sculpture, which was held at the Brooklyn Museum and consisted entirely of expatriate work. In 1924 Brinton hosted the Russian Art Exhibition at the Grand Central Palace, in collaboration with Igor Grabar of the National Tretiakov Gallery, which again failed to represent the latest developments in Soviet art, although much of the work had this time been sent from Russia.⁹⁹ The first exhibition to feature recent avant-garde work was the Modern Russian Artists show of 1924, held at the Heckscher Building under the auspices of the Société Anonyme. However, whilst featuring work by Malevich, Lissitzky, and Gabo, Dreier's collection of Soviet art was slim, and was necessarily padded out with similar work purchased on her European trip, such as paintings by Georges Braque and Jacques Lipchitz.¹⁰⁰ Despite this shortcoming, Dreier compensated by engaging Lozowick both to produce the catalogue cover, an architectonic typographic experiment in the *Machine Ornament* idiom, and to deliver a lecture in the gallery.

Dreier was a crucial figure in the importation of Russian and Soviet art into America. She founded the Société Anonyme in 1920 with Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray with the hope of creating a 'Museum of Modern Art'. The Société Anonyme was a pioneering forum for the dissemination of European Modernism in general, and Russian art in particular, and she held solo shows of work by David Burliuk, Vassili Kandinsky, and Archipenko in the early 1920s. Dreier had mixed feelings, however, about the political properties of post-revolutionary art practice. In 1920 she produced a favourable

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Dickran Tashjian, '“A Big Cosmic Force”: Katherine S. Dreier and the Russian/Soviet Avant-Garde', in J. Gross, ed., *The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America*, New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press, 2006, p. 53.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 61.

survey of political posters from the German Revolution, in which she reasoned that ‘the bourgeois class in its overculture [sic] had resisted all progress of new thoughts in the arts and philosophy, and therefore their interpreters in art could not be expected to give expression to a new political spirit’.¹⁰¹ She witnessed the same developments in Russia but crucially, as she wrote in her muddled 1923 study *Western Art and the New Era*, ‘it was but natural that that strong and vigorous mind among the painters, Kandinsky, was chosen by the Soviet Russian government to establish museums throughout all the smaller towns’.¹⁰² For Dreier, revolutionary politics were analogous to modernist art only in the loosest sense of a shared revolt against ossified values—like Heap, she was strongly influenced by Theosophy. There is no evidence that even as a teacher at the liberal New School of Social Research in the early days of the Depression she strayed far from a generalized cosmic reformism. Indeed, as Dickran Tashjian observes, her dismay at the ‘materialist’ direction of the Soviet Union was evident in her assertion, in a New School lecture of 1931, that ‘in my judgement the greatest service which Soviet Russia rendered the rest of the world was not in her experiment in government...but that she acted as an eruption with such force that she scattered many of her creative and living spirits over the entire world’.¹⁰³

For Dreier, Soviet art was integrated into a wider modernist pantheon. This was most forcibly evident at her 1926 exhibition International Exhibition of Modern Art, an epic survey of contemporary painting and sculpture held at the Brooklyn Museum, with work by European avant-garde pioneers, such as van Doesburg, Schwitters, and Moholy-Nagy, as well as lesser known figures such as Heinrich Hoerle and Franz Seiwert and established artists such as Picasso and Brancusi, alongside an array of American modernists, such as Charles Demuth, Stuart Davis, and Lozowick. Constantin Alajov, a Russian émigré best known for his suave illustrations for *The New Yorker*, designed the catalogue cover, which was more ‘constructivistic’ than Constructivist.

¹⁰¹ Katherine S. Dreier, ‘Posters and Pathing Stones’, *The Survey*, 1 May 1920, pp. 177-180, quoted in Katherine S. Dreier, *Western Art and the New Era: An Introduction to Modern Art*, New York: Brentano’s, 1923, p.109.

¹⁰² Dreier, *Western Art and the New Era*, p. 110.

¹⁰³ Katherine S. Dreier, ‘Present Day Russian Tendencies’, New School lecture 1931, cited in Tashjian, ‘A Big Cosmic Force’, p. 72.

Constructivism had a significant effect on Davis, an exhibitor at the show, who subsequently wrote to Dreier that he was particularly taken with the ‘constructionist school, Lissitzky, etc’.¹⁰⁴ Davis was soon working on the *Eggbeater* series with this work in mind, and wrote to his dealer that ‘the type of subject I am now interested in representing is characterized by simple geometrical solids’ before concluding that ‘this type of form has greater contemporary aesthetic utility than other types’, perhaps indicating a familiarity with the tenets of Constructivism (Fig. 18 and Fig. 19).¹⁰⁵

If Constructivism had but a slight influence on American artists, excepting Lozowick’s work of the early to mid-1920s and Davis’ *Eggbeater* series, then this was not due to limited coverage in art journals during the 1920s. Lozowick was arguably the most prolific writer on the subject. His *Modern Russian Art*, a 1925 study published by the Société Anonyme and developed from his lecture at the Modern Russian Artists show, was the first major survey. Lozowick wrote numerous articles on many different aspects of Soviet culture, from the films of Vsevolod Pudovkin to marionettes by Alexandra Exter. The earliest piece was a study of the ‘Russian Dadaists’ for the September/ December 1920 issue of *The Little Review*. Lozowick tacitly acknowledged the appellation was his own attempt to connect Russian ‘Ego-Futurists’ or ‘Cubo-Futurists’, namely the poets Vassili Gnedov and Alexander Krutchenich, with the New York Dada of Elsa von Freytag Loringhoven and the Zurich/ Paris Dada of Tristan Tzara. A more substantial study was his piece on Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International*, published in *Broom* in October 1922 to coincide with the van Diemen exhibition. The article did not mention Constructivism by name but referred specifically to ‘the magic word in modern Russian art: Construction’, and cited Tatlin as the leading Russian artist-constructor’.¹⁰⁶ He indicated the sources of ‘constructive art’:

Construction is inspired by what is most characteristic of our epoch: industry, machinery, science. Construction borrows the methods and makes use of the materials

¹⁰⁴ Stuart Davis to Katherine Dreier, 15 April 1927, in Ruth Bohan, *The Société Anonyme’s Brooklyn Exhibition: Katherine Dreier and Modernism in America*, Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982, p. 125.

¹⁰⁵ Stuart Davis to Edith Halpert, 11 August 1927, in *ibid*, p. 125.

¹⁰⁶ Louis Lozowick, ‘Tatlin’s Monument to the Third International’, *Broom*, October 1922, p. 232.

common in the technical processes. Hence iron, glass, concrete, circle, triangle, cube, cylinder, synthetically combined with mathematical precision and structural logic. Construction scorns prettiness, seeks strength, clarity, simplicity, acts as a stimulus to a vigorous life.¹⁰⁷

Although Lozowick celebrated the architectural modernity of Tatlin's Monument he appeared sceptical of the 'Cosmic Symbolism' of the different speeds of the three rotating parts of the tower, and mused that this reflected 'Romanticism slipping in by a back door'.¹⁰⁸ Lozowick cautioned that due to Russia's limited means the project was far from realization, and referred to the battle between 'the Philistine enemies' and Constructivists as 'a weary exercise'.¹⁰⁹

In his memoirs, Lozowick recalled that he had become acquainted with many Soviet artists at the van Diemen Gallery exhibition and they had recommended that he travel to the Soviet Union.¹¹⁰ On his subsequent journey, he met Malevich, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Rodchenko (who gave him a catalogue of 5 x 5=25, Constructivism's 1921 inaugural exhibition), Lissitzky, Osip and Lily Brik, and Shterenberg. He saw a performance of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, with stage designs by Lyubov Popova, which inspired him to create the sets for *Gas* in 1926 and led him to conclude that 'the Constructivist group...left a most powerful legacy in the theatre' (see Chapter Two).¹¹¹ In February 1923, Lozowick penned 'A Note on Modern Russian Art' for *Broom*, in which he discussed the complexity of the post-Revolutionary art world that he had encountered and its various factions.¹¹² Referring to Constructivism by name, he described a group of artists who differed considerably in their views but had 'at their

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 234.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Lozowick, *Survivor from a Dead Age*, p. 221.

¹¹¹ Ibid, p. 242.

¹¹² *Broom* was edited by Matthew Josephson and Harold Loeb from Berlin (and later from Rome and New York, where it folded in 1924). In the early 1920s, *Broom* was *The Little Review*'s only serious rival in covering the European avant-garde. Indeed, it served as a source for the latter magazine—Léger and Prampolini's articles were printed in *Broom* first, and *Broom* discussed *Constructivism* before any other English language journal. As a general note, the editors of *Broom*, acquaintances of Berlin Dada, had a more ironic, witty detachment than Anderson and Heap's more earnest attitude.

core what one might call irreverently a romantic adoration of the machine'.¹¹³ On the one hand, one faction, epitomized by Rodchenko, had abandoned art, whereas figures such as Sternberg and Kandinsky remained within its boundaries. Constructivist art was 'strictly utilitarian'. He also noted 'an extreme preoccupation with social theory', pointing out that the new art was parallel to the creation of the new State.¹¹⁴ Yet though broadly supportive he was slightly truculent—if an 'assumption that a new art can be the work of a new man, himself the product of a new social system', had informed the Soviet Government's policy, then whilst 'the assumption might be challenged; the policy might be criticized; that the effort is worth making is hardly open to doubt'.¹¹⁵ This article likely formed the basis of the 1924 lecture, which expanded into the 1925 *Modern Russian Art*. Alfred H. Barr Jr carried a copy of the book with him on his trip to Russia in late 1927, and used it as a primer for meeting the protagonists of Soviet art.¹¹⁶

By the time of the Machine-Age Exposition, Lozowick was actively involved in the cultural activities of the communist movement in America. He was the most politicized artist involved in the exhibition. Whilst it is difficult to chart Lozowick's political history, it is likely that his witnessing of a horrific pogrom in Kiev in 1905 catalysed his politicization. His participation in the journal *New Masses* from 1925 (which became overtly communist in 1928), the Workers' Drama League and the New Playwrights Theatre around 1926-7, and the John Reed Club in New York in 1929 marked his increasing role in the cultural activities surrounding the CPUSA, although he did not become a party member. By 1931, he was discussing 'Art in the Service of the Proletariat', arguing that 'the American revolutionary artist is above all the representative of the class of proletarians in their struggle for the overthrows [sic] of the capitalist system and for a new socialist society'.¹¹⁷

In May 1929, he produced a survey entitled 'A Decade of Soviet Art' for *The Menorah Journal* in which he positioned Constructivism firmly in the past. He wrote:

¹¹³ Louis Lozowick, 'A Note on Modern Russian Art', *Broom*, February 1923, p. 202.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 200.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 204.

¹¹⁶ Alfred H. Barr Jr, 'Russian Diary 1927-28', *October*, Winter 1978, p. 17.

¹¹⁷ Louis Lozowick, 'Art in the Service of the Proletariat', *Literature of the World Revolution*, No.4, 1931, reprinted in Lozowick, *Survivor from a Dead Age*, p. 124.

Ultimately, when art had accomplished its aim, it was to disappear and the artist to pass into the industries, into the work of organization of the new society. And, indeed, this has, in a sense, already been the fate of Constructivist art; very little of the school is left now, but its influence has been felt powerfully in the theater, architecture, the cinema and the applied arts.¹¹⁸

In America, the direct influence of Soviet Constructivism on fine art and architecture was limited in comparison with the discourse on Soviet film and theatre during the same period. Even in communist journals, artists such as Rodchenko and Stepanova were seldom mentioned, in contrast with Meyerhold or Eisenstein who were frequently discussed. However, the Constructivism of the Machine-Age Exposition was not derived directly from the Soviet version of the early 1920s, but was informed by the International Constructivism initiated in 1922 by Lissitzky and developed in the mid-1920s by van Doesburg, László Moholy-Nagy, the Bauhaus, and Kiesler. In Heap's exhibition, the Soviet work was subsumed, outside of the Russian Night, into a general rhetoric on the machine, which took in practitioners as disparate as Raymond Hood, Le Corbusier, and Alexander Vesnin. The Machine-Age Exposition was one stage in a process of converting International Constructivism into the chiefly apolitical, business friendly International Style—the high Modernism that ultimately dominated architectural practice in America. The key figure in this process was Kiesler, whose ideas had been formed as a member of Theo van Doesburg's De Stijl.

Van Doesburg had been pivotal in the organization of two major events: the Congress of International Progressive Artists, held in May 1922, and the Constructivist Congress, which was held at the Weimar Bauhaus in September that year. These occasions had brought together Lissitzky, Seiwert, Raoul Hausmann, Hans Richter, László Moholy-Nagy and Kurt Schwitters, thus connecting disparate strands of avant-garde practice. This union of the avant-garde followed 'A Call for Elementarist Art', which had been published in van Doesburg's *De Stijl* in October 1921. The joint authors—Ivan Puni, Hans Arp, Hausmann, and Moholy-Nagy—called for an art that 'is elementary because it does not philosophize, because it is built up of its own elements

¹¹⁸ Louis Lozowick, 'A Decade of Soviet Art', *The Menorah Journal*, May 1929, p. 245.

alone'.¹¹⁹ Significantly, the authors advised that artists should 'reject the styles' for 'we demand freedom from the styles to reach the STYLE'.¹²⁰ This synthesis was accompanied by the formation of 'the style', an elemental, dynamic form revealed after the layers of ornament had been stripped away. Furthermore, this style would be international, and an 'International Faction of Constructivists' headed by Lissitzky, van Doesburg, and Richter called for an international forum in all arts from all countries on a permanent basis. A full report with statements from the editors of *Veshch*, members of De Stijl, various national Constructivist groups, and a joint statement by the 'International Faction of Constructivists' subsequently appeared in *De Stijl*.¹²¹ Clearly conceived in the aftermath of the Great War, the ideologues of International Constructivism declared that 'forgetting questions of nationality, without political bias or self-seeking intention...art must become international or it will perish'.¹²²

Lissitzky stated, on behalf of *Veshch*, that during the war 'we were attacking the same problems in Russia as our friends here in the West, but without any knowledge of the others'.¹²³ This new international art was part of a 'new culture', in which 'the artist is companion to the scholar, the engineer, and the worker', who together were 'fighters for the new culture'.¹²⁴ Hans Richter, on behalf of Constructivist groups from Rumania, Switzerland, Scandinavia, and Germany, also emphasized the 'common task' of a 'working community' in furthering the 'International', and its aim to 'solve the

¹¹⁹ Raoul Hausmann, Hans Arp, Ivan Puni, and László Moholy-Nagy, 'A Call for Elementarist Art', 1921, trans. N. Bullock, in Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism*, p. 52.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ A Short Review of the Proceedings', 'Statement by the Editors of *Veshch/ Gegenstand/ Objet*', 'Statement by the Stijl Group', 'Statement by the Constructivist Groups of Rumania, Switzerland, Scandinavia, and Germany', 'Statement by the International Faction of Constructivists', *De Stijl*, Vol. V, No. 4, 1922, in Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism*, pp. 58-69.

¹²² Congress of International Progressive Artists: A Short Review of the Proceedings', 1922, trans. N. Bullock, in Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism*, p. 59.

¹²³ El Lissitzky, 'Statement by the Editors of *Veshch/ Gegenstand/ Objet*', 1922, in Bann, *The Tradition of Constructivism*, p. 63.

¹²⁴ Ibid, pp. 63-4.

problems of society'.¹²⁵ The International Faction of Constructivists concluded the proceedings by issuing a declaration of intent that stated that art, alongside science and technology, was a 'tool of universal progress'.¹²⁶ A collective conception of art would counter the 'tyranny of the individual', and the 'dreaming cosmic secrets' of the artist.¹²⁷ In sum, if International Constructivism appeared to be less overtly political than the Russian original version, a consequence of its non-political context, then it was nonetheless a theoretical mechanism that had its roots in a collective fight by artists in concert with workers to transform society. Contemporary to the Comintern, it was international and revolutionary in conception, and political in all but name.

There were numerous outcomes from the Constructivist conferences. The launch of Constructivist journals *G* in 1923 (edited by Richter), *Praesens* in Poland, *Disk* and *Stavba* in Prague, *Zenit* in Belgrade, the establishment of the Constructivist architectural group ABC in 1924 by Lissitzky, Mark Stam, and Hannes Meyer and their journal *ABC Beiträge zum Bauen*, and the new Constructivist orientation of *De Stijl*, *MA*, and *Broom*, all exemplified the international spread of Constructivism. In the Soviet Union, there was hostility from some factions to these developments, as evident in Gan's acerbic comments that 'in the West Constructivism fraternises with art...flirts with politics' reflecting the fact that the 'social and political structure of the R.S.F.S.R. and the structure of capitalist Europe are completely different'.¹²⁸ Gan's Russian Constructivism was, in contrast, 'fighting for the intellectual and material production of a communist culture'.¹²⁹ The covert nature of Constructivism's political identity in Europe attracted international support from non-political figures, such as Heap and Dreier. For Heap, the mediator was Kiesler.

Kiesler was especially drawn to van Doesburg's version of Constructivism, and joined *De Stijl* in 1924. They met in Berlin in 1923 when the latter visited the stage production *R.U.R.*, for which Kiesler had designed a mechanized set. As Dieter Bogner

¹²⁵ Hans Richter, 'Statement by the Constructivist Groups of Rumania, Switzerland, Scandinavia, and Germany', *ibid*, pp. 66-7.

¹²⁶ 'Statement by the International Faction of Constructivists', *ibid*, p. 69.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*.

¹²⁸ Alexei Gan, quoted in Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 238.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*.

points out, Kiesler's work drew increasingly from De Stijl—for example, the *City in Space* structure and the L and T exhibition design system were geometric, asymmetric, linear and planar constructions, not unlike Gerrit Rietveld's chairs or Piet Mondrian's paintings (Fig. 20, Fig. 21, and Fig. 22).¹³⁰ Bogner writes 'Kiesler turned not to the dynamically slanted Russian forms but to the Constructivist system of the Dutch Neoplasticists'—an exception being the work of Lissitzky, whose horizontal office building resembled Kiesler's horizontal skyscrapers.¹³¹ Furthermore, Kiesler claimed that van Doesburg had judged his *City in Space* exhibit at the 'Art Deco' exhibition to be the culmination of the De Stijl project. He apparently told Kiesler 'you have done what we all hoped one day to do'.¹³²

It was probable that Kiesler introduced van Doesburg to Heap, who printed a translation of Van Doesburg's article 'Evolution of Modern Architecture in Holland' (of 1924) in *The Little Review* in Spring 1925. From a letter sent by van Doesburg to Heap in April 1925, it is apparent that she planned to run a special number on De Stijl, although the magazine printed just the article alongside some experimental visual poetry by I. K. Bonset, van Doesburg's Dadaist alter ego.¹³³ The article was nonetheless important for van Doesburg's statement that the De Stijl architects 'in contrast to the pessimism of Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism...are solving the problem of a constructive and collective art'.¹³⁴ His privileging of Constructivism in this narrative of architecture marked the first major theoretical statement on the subject in *The Little Review*. A draft of 'Toward a Collective Construction', an earlier piece from 1923, was sent to Heap, though not published. It is arguable that his presentation of Constructivism as an objective 'new system' that in 'the future will see us finally reaching the expression of a new dimension in the reality of three dimensions' would have appealed

¹³⁰ Dieter Bogner, 'Kiesler and the European Avant-Garde', in Lisa Phillips, ed., *Frederick Kiesler*, ex. cat., New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1989, p. 50.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Frederick Kiesler, quoted in T. H. Creighton, 'Kiesler's Pursuit of an Idea', *Progressive Architecture*, July 1961, p. 109.

¹³³ Theo van Doesburg to Jane Heap, 24 April 1925, LRP, Box 6 Folder 22, non-paginated.

¹³⁴ Theo van Doesburg, 'Evolution of Modern Architecture in Holland', *The Little Review*, Spring 1925, p. 51.

to Heap's interests in the theosophical 'discovery' of the fourth dimension—as Stephen Bann writes, this comment was a residue from van Doesburg and Mondrian's early formulations on Neoplasticism, a philosophy derived from Mondrian's interest in Theosophy.¹³⁵ However, van Doesburg's argument that 'machinism in art is an illusion like the others (Naturalism, Futurism, Cubism, Purism, etc.) and an even more dangerous illusion than any metaphysical speculation' denuded the possibility of an exhibition superficially celebrating the machine.¹³⁶ Nevertheless, the non-political, or covertly political utopianism of van Doesburg's writings was important in the manifestation of Constructivism at the International Theatre Exposition and the Machine-Age Exposition.

If van Doesburg's version of Constructivism proved the most amenable to Heap in the organization of these exhibitions, then clearly Kiesler served as the chief courier. Yet on arrival in America in January 1926 he realized quickly that whilst the grandiosity of his statements aroused curiosity, his ideas needed to be aligned with practical considerations if he was to make a living. Throughout 1927 he worked as an assistant at the Anderson Galleries, and in 1928 worked briefly for the architects Helme, Corbett, Harrison. Kiesler was forced for financial reasons to adapt his practice to a commercial setting, and this was soon apparent in his employment by a department store, Saks Fifth Avenue, to create window displays (Fig. 23 and Fig. 24).

As stated, Kiesler's L and T exhibition system was conceived according to the De Stijl version of Constructivism. Having admired Kiesler's display at the International Exposition of New Theatre Technique in 1924, van Doesburg wrote that:

in no city of the world have I seen anything similar to it. In contrast to previous exhibitions in which art objects were hung next to one another without relation, in this method of demonstration the closest relations between the different works were established by their arrangement in space. It is extremely important and fortunate that the Theatre and Music Festival has found a basic, practical, and economical solution to this problem in the new exhibition system created by Kiesler.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Bann, *The Tradition of Constructivism*, p. 115.

¹³⁶ Five of his pieces were exhibited, including *Card Players*, *Colour Construction*, and three *Time Space Constructions*).

¹³⁷ Theo van Doesburg, quoted in 'New Display Techniques for "Art for this Century"', Designed by Frederick Kiesler', *Architectural Forum*, No. 78, February 1943, p. 50.

The L and T, or Leger and Trager, system maximized exhibition space by situating works of art on constructions in the centre of the hall, but also complemented avant-garde work by reconfiguring conventions of display. Mary Anne Staniszewski writes that in contrast to the ‘salon style’ which put ‘works of art in relatively dense, tiered installations...the L and T units instead brought the artworks into the space and time of the spectator’.¹³⁸ As with his architectural and stage projects, Kiesler sought an exhibition device that was flexible, without clear contours, and which created strong relationships between audience and environment (later defined as ‘Correalism’), in harmony with van Doesburg’s rubric that an ‘equilibrium of tensions forms the quintessence of the new constructive unity’.¹³⁹

Kiesler’s decorations for Saks were innovative and arresting—items were displayed like works of art, placed irregularly at points in front of a De Stijl/Constructivist panel running the entire length of the store. Cynthia Goodman writes that ‘continuity’ was central in his work, from his earliest stage designs to his later theories on Correalism. This was evident in the running backdrop and the irregularity of the display, which gave the effect of a continuous, variegated band: ‘in addition to the irregularly proportioned window frames, some of the other unusual display techniques included the asymmetrical arrangement of goods and varying heights for the objects on display, as well as varying heights for the ceilings of the individual displays’.¹⁴⁰ In his pioneering analysis of store display, *Contemporary Art Applied to the Store and its Display*, Kiesler claimed that at Saks ‘the public saw the first extensive presentation of modern show windows, which I was fortunate as to be called upon to design’.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2001, p. 8.

¹³⁹ Theo van Doesburg and Cornelis van Eesteren, ‘Toward a Collective Construction’, 1923, trans. S. Bann, in Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism*, p. 117.

¹⁴⁰ Cynthia Goodman, ‘The Art of Revolutionary Display Techniques’, in L. Philips, ed., *Frederick Kiesler*, p. 58.

¹⁴¹ Frederick Kiesler, *Contemporary Art Applied to the Store and its Display*, 1929, London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons Ltd, 1930, p. 67.

Contemporary Art Applied to the Store and its Display, which was published in 1929, was Kiesler's manifesto on the adaptation of Constructivism to a commercial setting. Kiesler used the phrase 'the ideology of the show window' to emphasize the importance of this area of practice.¹⁴² In the foreword, he announced that the book was written for several reasons—as a corrective to the 'poor and distorted Modernism' imported into America, to engender beauty based on 'efficiency' rather than ornament, to educate 'the established store', and to propagandise the use of the department store window as a 'silent loud speaker and not dead storage'.¹⁴³ The book was made up of short, programmatic chapters adorned with numerous illustrations of contemporary art and design and was in itself an important survey of Modernism in the 1920s, as well as a handbook for store designers and a treatise on aesthetics. It was also a bold attempt to locate Constructivist ideas within a practical American context.

This was especially apparent in a chapter entitled 'America adopts and adapts the new art in industry'. Kiesler set the scene:

in 1928 a new era began in American retail and manufacturing life. The modern art of the Old World started to take possession of the New World. American business discovered in it an art not only new in itself, but also new in its application as an immense selling force. Characteristically, America used it first for one great purpose: increased prosperity through increased sales.¹⁴⁴

If America had a retardataire art scene, then it led the world in 'everything except art'.¹⁴⁵ In contrast to the antiquities of Europe and its staid museums, in America 'contemporary art reached the masses through the store [which] was the true introducer of Modernism to the public at large...it revealed contemporary art to American commerce'.¹⁴⁶ Kiesler charted the history of contemporary art in the department store, citing the importance of exhibitions at the Newark Museum from 1912 but locating Art in Trade, a 1927 Macy's exposition, as the 'first representative exposition of modern interior decoration in America'.¹⁴⁷ If the most significant Constructivist store window design was Kiesler's

¹⁴² Ibid, p. 68.

¹⁴³ Ibid, non-paginated

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 66.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid,

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

own work for Saks, then oddly he did not mention Lozowick's 1926 designs for Lord and Taylor (Fig. 25), although he did note the importance of an exhibition of French decorative art at the store. In any event, these 'three great institutions' initiated a 'revolution in taste'.¹⁴⁸

It was precisely America's lack of an 'art of its own' that made it ideal for this important development in the dissemination of a 'new American style of art' as:

the new art is for the masses. If ever a country has had the chance to create an art for its people, not through individuals and handicraft, but through machine mass production, that country is America today. It will be adaptation and a rebirth. It will be American. That is: it will be of the machine. The expression of America is the mass, and the expression of the masses, the machine.¹⁴⁹

The logic of Kiesler's machine adulation here was bound up in immediate concerns—by designing specifically for the machine, the machine freed the designer from 'handicraft' and allowed the designer to perform the work 'more exactly, quickly, cheaply, and as beautifully'.¹⁵⁰ The machine would initiate the 'new style' for 'here is where a new art can come into closest contact with the stream of the mass, by employing the quickest working faculty: the eye'.¹⁵¹ Notably, the 'class' element of Constructivism that Gan had propounded was transformed into the less controversial and more semantically open notion of 'mass'.

If these statements witnessed the translation of Constructivism into a corporate setting, then large sections of the book were drawn from Kiesler's earlier utopic writings. For example, in chapter five, which concerned 'organic building', 'the city in space', and 'functional architecture', Kiesler included his 'Manifesto of Tensionism'. This piece had originally been sent to *The Little Review* in 1925, and an edited draft in the magazine's papers reveals that the article was due to be published in 1926, but was laid aside following his break with Heap. Here, Kiesler called for 'elasticity of building adequate to the elasticity of living', decrying the 'walls' that enjoined an 'armorized

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 67.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 68.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

civilization'.¹⁵² The *City in Space*, a suspended 'system of spans (tension) in free SPACE', was the 'first example of "Tensionism", an elastic building system of tubes, platforms and cables, developed from bridge building'.¹⁵³ Tensionism was also illustrated with the reproduction of a plan for a department store—a dramatic tower 'anchored to the ground only at the central axis', spiralling circular 'corkscrew' floors making a continuous floor apparently made feasible by the 'cantilever properties of steel'.¹⁵⁴ Drawings of Kiesler's 'Tensionist' horizontal skyscraper, a 'residential' rather than 'commercial' building, were accompanied by a caveat: 'we are for complete standardization of building materials, of manufacturing and construction, but we are certainly not for standardization of materials'.¹⁵⁵

Having cited the 'big four' founders of architectural Modernism—Otto Wagner, Louis Sullivan, H. P. Berlage, and Tony Garnier—Kiesler located 'functional horizontalism' as an 'achievement of the De Stijl group'.¹⁵⁶ An analogous group consisted of Lissitzky, Werner Graeff, Mies van der Rohe, Moholy-Nagy, and Richter, with Antonio Sant Elia and Tatlin listed as precursors. The internationalism of this group, who, apart from the Futurist Sant Elia, all practised variants of Constructivism, was crucial—indeed, it was the War that had 'delayed the realization of the new architecture'.¹⁵⁷ These observations were illustrated with reproductions of avant-garde work from Russia and Europe and commercial design objects from America. Kiesler included Malevich's 1925 design for a 'Suprematist Architectona' skyscraper, van Doesburg's 1927 Motion Picture Auditorium in Strasbourg, sculpture by Gabo, Mies's German Pavilion at the Barcelona Exposition of 1929, buildings by Erich Mendelsohn, Bruno Taut, stage designs by Exter and Alexander Vesnin, designs by the Reimann School of Berlin, alongside numerous reproductions of Kiesler's own work, including several photographs of his Saks displays. He also reproduced much work by European modernists of all stripes, from Klee to Picasso, and American artists such as Elie

¹⁵² Ibid, pp. 48-9.

¹⁵³ Ibid, p. 50.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 62.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 40.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 41.

Nadelmann and John Storrs. Store furniture was represented by a variety of display cases and cabinets, storefronts, furniture, and interior designs.

The book was elegantly designed, with text printed in a simple sans serif font (Kiesler also reproduced a flyer for his International Exposition of the New Theatre Technique and work by Pietro de Saga as examples of innovative typography). Like Moholy-Nagy's 1925 *Malerei/ Fotografie/Film* (Painting/ Photography/ Film), the book was essentially an exhibition in print form. With its ample illustrations of the European and Russian avant-gardes alongside American Modernism, Kiesler's *Contemporary Art Applied to the Store and its Display* was a step on from the Machine-Age Exposition towards corporate Constructivism. Kiesler also celebrated the work of the engineer: 'the engineering constructions of the last fifty years have had the greatest influence on the present form of architecture', and grain elevators, power plants, and bridges as a source for the designer.¹⁵⁸ Kiesler's grafting of older Constructivist ideas to the commercial considerations of freelance designers reflected Heap's legitimization of the corporate machine age in the 'Machine-Age Exposition' article, but offered more practical, local solutions based on the problems of store display.

Kiesler's book marked a further stage in the mutation of International Constructivism into a generic international style. One chapter subheading stated 'instead of national international architecture'.¹⁵⁹ Kiesler wrote:

happily for contemporary architecture, today is no longer a conglomeration of all sorts of materials and styles, but a living expression of a community, or a personality. And so it is in the best way towards becoming INTERNATIONAL architecture. ONE STYLE FOR ALL. Whether it is in a work of Le Corbusier in France, Frank Lloyd Wright in America, Perret in Tunis, Oud in Holland, Vesnin in Moscow, the modern spirit has, and can only have, the same expression.¹⁶⁰

This internationalism might have been compromised by Kiesler's membership of the American Union of Decorative Artists and Craftsmen (AUDAC), which was founded in 1928, but, according to Jeffrey Meikle, the group had so many émigré members that

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 39.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

sometimes meetings were held in German.¹⁶¹ AUDAC held an exhibition in 1930 at the Grand Central Palace, which featured five rooms designed by five members, including Kiesler, Wolfgang and Pola Hoffmann, Willis S. Harrison, and Alexander Kachinsky. Kiesler designed the overall plan of the exhibition, the most striking feature of the display (Fig. 26 and Fig. 27). It featured a gallery divided into five adjacent open chambers, with the name AUDAC in giant letters in steel rods on a large band over the frontage. Kiesler's room at the centre was the most informed by European avant-garde design, and included suspended furniture derived from his *City in Space* project.

AUDAC's publication *Annual of American Design 1931* was a lavishly illustrated collection of modernist designs with several essays by its most prestigious members, including Hugh Ferriss on 'Architecture', Frank Lloyd Wright on 'Principles of Design', Edward Steichen on 'Commercial Photography', Lee Simonson on 'New Materials', and C. Adolph Glassgold on 'Design in America'. The introductory essay was by Lewis Mumford on the subject of 'Culture and Machine Art'. Mumford's argument against standardization revealed his truculence towards the extremities of the European avant-garde. He wrote that 'whatever the politics of a country may be, the machine is a communist!'—whilst seeming liberatory it risked levelling all variety and producing a uniform, aesthetically barren culture.¹⁶² This refusal of aesthetic standardization was reflected in the broad range of work included, which spanned 'moderne' or 'art deco' designs to more obviously hard-edged Modernism, typically the product of émigrés, such as Kiesler, Joseph Urban, and William Lescaze.

In 1932, Buckminster Fuller's magazine *Shelter* printed designs and an essay by Kiesler concerning 'The Space Theatre for Woodstock, N.Y.', alternately titled 'The Universal Theatre', a project that was never realized (Fig. 28). Here Kiesler attempted to create a flexible, prefabricated theatre along the lines specified in his essays in the International Theatre Exposition catalogue. In 'Debacle of the Modern Theatre', Kiesler had railed against the 'picture stage' and called for a platform which could be seen from

¹⁶¹ Jeffrey Meikle, *Twentieth Century Ltd: Industrial Design in America, 1925-1929*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979, p. 27.

¹⁶² Lewis Mumford, 'Culture and Machine Art', in R. L. Leonard, ed., *Annual of American Design 1931*, American Union of Decorative Artists and Craftsmen (AUDAC), New York: Ives Washburn, 1931, p. 9.

all parts of the audience area, could be rotated, and would facilitate spatially dynamic performances. The *Space Stage* was on display at the original Vienna theatre exhibition and at the 1925 Paris exhibition, but only as a model at the 1926 New York show.¹⁶³ Kiesler discussed the *Space Stage* as a forum for ‘multi-purposed versatility rather than a single-purposed stability’ in relation to the demands of a flexible American audience, characterized as a ‘changing flux of independent groups’ rather than as a ‘unit mass’.¹⁶⁴ The proposed building had a large circular auditorium attached to a long rectangular structure, which housed the stage and a workshop. It was designed for summer performances and needed to be spacious and airy. With no proscenium, and a fully flexible interior—the orchestra pit could be transformed into an arena—the ‘Universal’, like the Film Guild Cinema, met function and theme with an innovative Constructivist design. This latter building of 1929 (Fig. 29) is discussed in detail in the chapter on film, yet it is important to note here that with its asymmetrical frontage of geometric planes, multi-directional projectors, ‘camera eye’ screen, and bespoke modernist décor, the cinema was an ambitious attempt to integrate technological function into the design. The camera eye made the audience at once viewer, projector, and participant—although it differed widely from Russian Constructivist architecture, it was thematically derived from Constructivism. The cinema was included in *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*.

When van Doesburg died in 1931, Kiesler drafted a tribute, also intended for the May 1932 issue of *Shelter* but not published. He wrote ‘Doesburg is dead—but his absence is more cogent than the presence of all neo-architects, bourgeois and pen-drummers’ who ‘will advertise him to sell themselves’.¹⁶⁵ This uncharacteristically vehement outpouring, written as ‘loathing grips me’, was directed at those who neglected Van Doesburg in his life but celebrated him in death—these were ‘parasites’,

¹⁶³ Frederick Kiesler, ‘Debacle of the Theatre’, *International Theatre Exposition Catalogue*, *The Little Review*, Winter 1926, p. 70. An abridged version of this article was in fact reproduced in *Shelter*, May 1932, alongside excerpts from various other written pieces Kiesler.

¹⁶⁴ Frederick Kiesler, ‘A Festival Shelter: The Space Theatre for Woodstock, N.Y.’, *Shelter*, May 1932, p. 42.

¹⁶⁵ Frederick Kiesler, ‘Doesburg is Dead’, FKP, undated, non-paginated.

‘profiteers’, and ‘cliques’.¹⁶⁶ A residual Constructivist attack on bourgeois values, however vague, was evident here, proving that Kiesler never entirely elided its political dimension. Indeed, although committed to commercial art, Kiesler later became involved in the New Deal arts projects, joining the Works Progress Administration as a scout for mural locations.¹⁶⁷

In 1934, the left wing critic E. M. Benson penned an article for the *American Magazine of Art* entitled ‘Wanted: An American Bauhaus’, which was illustrated with designs by Kiesler for an ‘Institute of Art and Industrial Design’, an uncompromising building with a nearly blank façade—Benson described the building as ‘functional down to the square inch’ (Fig. 30).¹⁶⁸ The building would never be built. Benson criticized American design schools as ‘entrenched in an archaic system of art instruction that is unalterably blind to the changing requirements of industry and the new modes of living’ which churned out students ‘hopelessly combating the fire-spitting dragons of reality with rusty flintlocks’.¹⁶⁹ A design institute need not be modelled exactly after the Bauhaus, so long as it was entirely different from these conservative institutions, such as the Cranbrook Academy. Benson quoted extensively from Moholy-Nagy’s *The New Vision* to convey the achievement of the Bauhaus in contributing to the ‘sound planning of man’s life’.¹⁷⁰ It is fitting that Kiesler would design the imagined American corollary of the Bauhaus, although he was not involved in the actual American Bauhaus, which was founded by Moholy-Nagy as the School of Design in Chicago in 1939.

As the Bauhaus was a major influence on the International Style, it is worth investigating the impact of its work and theories in America, which, like the introduction of Constructivism, was a staggered, uneven process. Aside from scattered private correspondence, such as a letter from New York gallery owner Carl Zigrosser to Gropius requesting a folio of Bauhaus work in 1922, the Bauhaus was not widely known in the American arts press until the second half of the decade when numerous

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Lisa Phillips, ‘Environmental Artist’, in Lisa Phillips, ed., *Frederick Kiesler*, p. 114.

¹⁶⁸ E. M. Benson, ‘Wanted: An American Bauhaus’, *American Magazine of Art*, June 1934, p. 310.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 307.

¹⁷⁰ L. Moholy-Nagy, cited in *ibid*, p. 308.

Americans, from Dorothy Thompson to Philip Johnson, made pilgrimages to the school. Some major figures of the Bauhaus were discussed in the American media as individual architects. ‘Neues Bauen’ was first brought to America at the 1922 competition for the Chicago Tribune Tower when Gropius submitted a design (Fig. 31). Max Taut and Ludwig Hilberseimer also competed for the commission. Tafuri writes that Gropius and Taut’s designs ‘were clearly influenced by the “dynamic equilibriums” of International Constructivism’.¹⁷¹ Hilberseimer’s design (Fig. 32), an uncompromising stack of rectangles entirely without ornamentation, shocked the panel and press—Tafuri argues that the proposed building ‘annuls the communicative capacity of architecture’, yet ironically this style was frequently revisited in post-war skyscraper architecture, most famously Mies’s 1959 Seagram Building.¹⁷² In any case, the competition was won by an American entrant, the firm Howells and Hood (the latter being Raymond Hood) who presented a considerably more conservative design, a gothic tower that was completed in 1925 (Fig. 33).

Gropius and Hood were both included at the Machine-Age Exposition. The catalogue was typically vague about German work on display—for example exhibits 186 to 209 were listed simply as photographs of ‘New German Architecture’—yet it did state that Gropius and Adolph Meyer’s State Theatre at Jena was an exhibit, although it did not specify whether this was a model or a photograph. A photograph of the theatre was reproduced in the catalogue, alongside one of the staff houses at the Dessau Bauhaus and another of the main building. Margaret Kentgens-Craig has written that ‘German architecture was only poorly represented in the accompanying text, but the fact that reviewers often mentioned its impressive formal quality implies that the visual material of the show balanced the textual inadequacies and allowed the audience to gain some insight into the work’.¹⁷³ If ‘the Machine-Age Exposition inspired speculation on an artistically important, universalizing movement in the United States [then] the

¹⁷¹ Manfredo Tafuri, ‘The Disenchanted Mountain: The Skyscraper and the City’, in Giorgio Ciucci, Francesco Dal Co, Mario Manieri-Elia, and Manfredo Tafuri, eds., trans. Barbara Luigia La Penta, *The American City: From the Civil War to the New Deal*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1979, p. 409.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Margaret Kentgens-Craig, *The Bauhaus and America: First Contacts, 1919-1936*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999, p. 71.

curators had undoubtedly recognized the value Gropius attributed to the machine and its influence on the new architecture'.¹⁷⁴ Yet there was a tendency in America to misrepresent the work of the Bauhaus. She writes 'in the exhibitions of the twenties, the Bauhaus was often represented by individual artists or groups, divorced from the school's overall concept and regrouped in other categories such as painting, sculpture, graphics, and theater designs'.¹⁷⁵ For Kentgens-Craig, this was especially evident in the 1930-31 'Exhibition from the Bauhaus, Dessau', which was organized by the Harvard Society of Contemporary Art and curated by Lincoln Kirstein. She criticizes Kirstein's presentation whereby 'a glossing-over of time frames and concepts is also evident in Kirstein's incorrect characterization of Mies's architecture as consistently functionalist'.¹⁷⁶

This latter exhibition was another important stepping-stone in the development of the International Style and the foundation of the Department of Architecture at the Museum of Modern Art. When it moved to the John Becker Gallery in early 1931, Philip Johnson had acted as an assistant. It was an early indicator of the direction MoMA would take, but also of the views of the 'Harvard circle' who generated the ideological core of the museum. Kirstein's presentation of the Bauhaus emblemized the views of his peer group. He stressed the essentially broad social base of the school:

they came from all classes, from the rich Berlin bourgeois and from the peasantry. Politically speaking, they embraced all the febrile beliefs and dogmas currently popular. There were anarchists, spartacists, communists, all of them more or less unsettled and rebellious against existing and pre-existing conditions in art and life.¹⁷⁷

Yet it was precisely their rebellious irreverence that was appealing to Kirstein, rather than any revolutionary political beliefs. Kirstein dismissed Gropius's successor Hannes Meyer, who became Director in 1929, as a 'Swiss communist [who] was obsessed with the idea of *Sachlichkeit*, that is, the idea of extreme practicability, the minimum of

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. pp. 71-2.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 72.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 73.

¹⁷⁷ Lincoln Kirstein, 'Bauhaus: Introductory Note', *Catalogue of an Exhibition from the Bauhaus, Dessau, Germany*, March 13 to March 28 1931, The Arts Club of Chicago, reprinted in Kentgens-Craig, p. 235

construction and the maximum of functional potentiality'.¹⁷⁸ Meyer 'carried functionalism to such a degree of fantastic thoroughness that diagrams were made to show the proper circulation for one or two or three persons together in a room', and consequently 'the Bauhaus fell into disrepute' (Fig. 34).¹⁷⁹ The replacement of Meyer with Mies marked a recovery: 'instead of designing ten possible chairs, they build him one actual chair'.¹⁸⁰ Mies' work was the building block of MoMA's International Style—the high Modernism that ultimately dominated architectural practice in America (Fig. 35).

The American commercial skyscraper was the first scalp sought by Hitchcock and Johnson as they configured the International Style. Johnson's article 'The Skyscraper School of Modern Architecture' pilloried those who 'squint at the skyline from Brooklyn, safe from the intrusion of ornament, enraptured by the vastness of it all'.¹⁸¹ The skyscrapers were the products of 'American megalomania', overly ornate towers of tastelessness. Johnson was adamant that:

the story of American skyscraper design is not the story of revolt and founding of a new architecture. A new scale in engineering, perhaps, but not a new aesthetic style. A style must have a consistent attitude on the question of ornament. If a fundamentally new method of construction is introduced, that construction should receive adequate expression.¹⁸²

The villain of the piece was Ferriss, who 'is not an architect' despite having 'more influence on architecture than the architects' (Fig. 36).¹⁸³ Johnson rounded on 'his falsely lighted renderings that picture fantastic crags rising high above dark caverns', which proposed 'a type of building which only the artists' brush can construct'.¹⁸⁴

Whilst Ferriss wrote in 1926 that 'the underlying truth of a building is that it is a Mass

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 236.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 237.

¹⁸¹ Philip Johnson, 'The Skyscraper School of Modern Architecture', *The Arts*, May 1931, p. 573.

¹⁸² Ibid, p. 575.

¹⁸³ Ibid, p. 569.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

in Space', one of the chief tenets of the International Style was 'volume'.¹⁸⁵ Some skyscrapers were grudgingly included in *The International Style*, notably Howe and Lescaze's incomplete Philadelphia Savings Fund Building and Hood and Fouilhoux's McGraw-Hill Building, but the latter was chastised as 'the heavy ornamental crown is an illogical and unhappy break in the general system of regularity and weights down the whole design'.¹⁸⁶ However, these were rare exceptions.

Johnson was far from alone in his condemnation of the American commercial skyscraper. Following the 1929 Crash and the onset of the depression, the skyscraper was tarnished as a ludicrous totem of the hubris of those greedy adherents of corporate 'boosterism' who were judged responsible for America's growing malaise. In *The New Republic*, one writer decried such 'bull market architecture'. He wrote 'the material embodiment of the late bull market remains in our metropolitan structures of towering height. They soar boldly above a surrounding mesa of roofs...they hover over the flat plateau of stability, the ironic witnesses of collapsed hopes'.¹⁸⁷ The skyscrapers risked becoming 'monuments in the most horrific sense of the word'.¹⁸⁸ In 1931, Frank Lloyd Wright penned a diatribe about 'The Tyranny of the Skyscraper', illustrated with photographs of skyscrapers by Steiner and Evans, which was directed against those 'extended telescopes, uplifted elephant-trunks, Bedford stone rockets, Gothic toothpicks, modern fountain pens, and "Eversharps" shrieking verticality, selling perpendicularity to the earthworms'.¹⁸⁹ Wright deemed these structures 'utterly barbaric, they rise regardless of special consideration for environment or for each other'.¹⁹⁰ He presented them as absurd machines in a commercially driven city: 'they whistle they steam, they

¹⁸⁵ Hugh Ferriss quoted in Carol Willis, 'Drawing Towards Metropolis' in Hugh Ferriss, *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*, 1929, Princeton Architectural Press, 1986. p. 151.

¹⁸⁶ Henry Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style*, New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1932, p.162.

¹⁸⁷ 'Bull Market Architecture', *The New Republic*, 68, 8 July 1931, p. 192.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 193.

¹⁸⁹ Frank Lloyd Wright, 'The Tyranny of the Skyscraper', *Creative Art*, No. 8, July 1931, p. 328.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 332.

moor dirigibles, they wave flags, or they merely aspire, and nonetheless very much resemble each other at all points'.¹⁹¹

Wright himself occupied a curious position in relation to the International Style. Hitchcock and Johnson perceived him as an influential figure who 'belongs to the international style no more than Behrens or Perret or Van der Velde'.¹⁹² This earlier generation was marked by 'romantic individualism', and a reluctance to relinquish antiquated ornamentation situated these architects 'more akin to the men of a hundred years ago than to the generation which has come to the fore since the War'.¹⁹³ The International Style, therefore, was up-to-date and exclusive, and it ultimately rejected Wright, Ferriss, and all American architecture apart from the buildings closest to their dictum. In citing a central style amidst the chaos of contemporary architecture, Hitchcock and Johnson presented 'principles' that were 'few and broad'.¹⁹⁴ These were 'volume rather than mass', 'regularity rather than axial symmetry...as the chief means of ordering design', and delimited 'arbitrary applied decoration'.¹⁹⁵ These tendencies could be identified on an international basis in buildings by a select range of architects. The internationalism was slightly disingenuous as the authors provided a mere smattering of architects from Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, England, Finland, France, Holland, Italy, Japan, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the USSR. The two largest groupings in *The International Style* were the United States and Germany. Yet whereas American architects numbered six (excluding Mies's early American project), there were twenty-six architects in the German section. The International Style, therefore, was really 'Neues Bauen', the closest architectural corollary to International Constructivism, with appended examples from other countries. Furthermore, of the handful of American buildings tolerated by Hitchcock and Johnson, the most favoured were designed by émigré architects. Alongside Kiesler, Richard Neutra, William Lescaze, and Joseph Urban were considered pioneers of the International Style in America.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² H.R. Hitchcock and P. Johnson, op.cit, p. 43.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 36.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

The Austrian-born Neutra travelled to America in 1925. He worked briefly for Frank Lloyd Wright and co-founded the short-lived AGIC (Architectural Group for Industry and Commerce), before settling in California, where he spent the remainder of his career. With Rudolf Schindler, he designed the Jardinette Apartments in Hollywood, under the auspices of AGIC, in 1927—an irregular geometric building which bore some resemblance to the Dessau Bauhaus. His Lovell Health House (Fig. 37), a spectacular and extensive concrete structure hugging the top of a rugged Californian hill, was completed in 1929, and was important as the first steel frame private residence in America. His writings on architecture, *Wie baut Amerika? (How America Builds)* of 1927 and *Amerika: Die Stilbildung des Neuen Bauens in den Vereinigten Staaten (America, the Influences of Modern Architecture)* of 1930, were equally pioneering. Here Neutra surveyed American building techniques and idiosyncrasies, such as prefabrication and zoning, with an enthused Amerikanismus. The photographic reproductions in *Wie baut Amerika?* were particularly striking in their use of New Vision techniques. His design project for an imaginary city, called ‘Rush City Reformed’, which included geometric skyscrapers without ornament, ‘was conceived more thoroughly and comprehensively, and therefore more humanely, than the brutal futuristic ideas developed by Ludwig Hilberseimer and Le Corbusier’.¹⁹⁶ Yet whilst Neutra’s writings were not translated into English and his architectural work was mainly for private clients in California, his reputation was considerable and he was the lone West Coast architect at the Modern Architecture: International Exhibition.

On the East Coast, his compatriot Joseph Urban designed the New School for Social Research (Fig. 38). Urban had travelled to the United States before taking up American citizenship in 1917. He designed extensively for the theatre, at the Boston Opera House and for the Ziegfield Follies. The New School was founded by the liberal ideologues Thorstein Veblen, James Harvey Robinson, and Charles Beard in 1919. Urban’s design for the relocated school on West 12 Street marked a clear departure from his previous ‘Jugendstil’ inspired work, such as the Bedell Store in New York. The building was completed in 1930, and opened the following year. The façade was made up of alternating horizontal strips of windows and polychromic brickwork, with simple

¹⁹⁶ Manfred Sack, *Richard Neutra*, Germany: Verlag für Architektur, 1992, p. 25.

juxtapositions of black window frames and black and white bricks. The interior was similarly spare in structural terms, albeit adorned with murals by Thomas Hart Benton and José Clemente Orozco, and decorated in an array of colours from 'burnt sienna' to 'light chrome yellow'.¹⁹⁷ The New School was somewhat criticized by Philip Johnson in 1931, who deemed it an 'anomaly of a building' which was 'pretentious' and deviated from the 'International Style'.¹⁹⁸ Yet although it was ultimately an 'illusion' of the International Style, the New School was nonetheless 'pioneering'.¹⁹⁹ Robert A.M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, and Thomas Mellins capture the position of this building in relation to Hitchcock and Johnson's stipulations, stating that it was 'New York's first example of the forms, if not necessarily the principles, of the International Style'.²⁰⁰

The Swiss-born Lescaze travelled to New York in 1920, where he initially worked as a painter, moving in modernist circles that included the poet Hart Crane and gallery owner Albert E. Gallatin. He was a moderately successful artist and exhibited at the Whitney Studio Club. Although his architectural career began in 1923 with a remodelling of a New York town house, Lescaze was initially more successful as an interior designer. Two of his three exhibits at the Machine-Age Exposition were interiors (the other being a Soldiers and Sailors Memorial). He set up the partnership Howe and Lescaze, with George Howe, in 1929. Although Lescaze's first modernist building was the Oak Lane County Day School nursery in 1929, the firm Howe and Lescaze's most prestigious project was the Philadelphia Saving Fund Society Building (Fig. 39), constructed between 1929 and 1931, which was the first International Style skyscraper to be built. On completion, Howe and Lescaze hired Steiner to photograph the building. As Lorraine Welling Lanmon has pointed out, the building resembled some of the more modernist designs for the Chicago Tribune Tower competition, especially

¹⁹⁷ Robert A. M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, and Thomas Mellins, *New York 1930: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Two World Wars*, New York: Rizzoli Press, 1987, p. 116.

¹⁹⁸ Philip Johnson, 'The Architecture of the New School', *The Arts*, March 1931, reprinted in Philip Johnson, *Writings*, Oxford University Press, 1979, pp. 35-36.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 35.

²⁰⁰ Stern, Gilmartin, and Mellins, p. 115.

those by Knud Lönberg-Holm, Hans Scharoun, and Max Taut.²⁰¹ This thirty-two story asymmetric tower, free of ornament and, as the client James M. Wilcox termed it, ‘ultra-practical’, was also the second air-conditioned skyscraper.²⁰² Howe and Lescaze’s designs for the Museum of Modern Art, which ranged from a radical tower of rectangular boxes stacked at right-angles in a cross pattern to an imposing, rectangular skyscraper, were more extreme than the Philadelphia building, but were never realized, nor were their Le Corbusier inspired designs for the Christie-Forsythe housing development.

Whilst these architects occasionally made utopic claims for their work, they generally avoided making political statements that might hinder establishing their careers in the United States. With the exception of Urban’s design for the New School, their clients were mostly either corporate organizations or private individuals who were investing in modern architecture, but not in any attendant radical social claims. Likewise, if the source of the International Style was the politicized ‘Neues Bauen’, in particular the work of the Bauhaus, then there was a definite resistance by the authors to any utopian or political claims made for the architecture. In his preface to the book, Barr Jr stated that ‘the aesthetic qualities of the Style are the principal concern of the authors of this book [who] have made little attempt to present here the technical or sociological aspects of the style except in so far as they are related to problems of design’.²⁰³ Whilst acknowledging the ‘extreme importance of these factors’, the focus was entirely on formal developments, involving a sacrifice of the commitment to transforming the social held many of these architects. For example, Le Corbusier’s 1922 polemic *Vers Une Architecture*, which appeared in English in 1927, had a certain influence on the International Style by coalescing tendencies in architecture into a single current. Yet William H. Jordy has written that:

²⁰¹ Lorraine Welling Lanmon, *William Lescaze, Architect*, Philadelphia: The Art Alliance Press, 1987, pp. 50-55.

²⁰² Robert A. M. Stern, *George Howe: Toward a Modern Architecture*, Yale University Press, 1975, p. 114.

²⁰³ Alfred H. Barr, ‘Preface’, Hitchcock and Johnson, *The International Style*, p. 29.

the tenor of these books is very different. Le Corbusier stated in 1922, ‘there exists a new spirit’. Alfred Barr, in his introduction, could say ‘there exists today a modern style as original, as consistent, as logical, and as consistent, and as widely distributed as any in the past.’²⁰⁴

If ‘spirit’ was reduced to ‘style’, then so was the social, and the hostility to Meyer was based on an analogous rejection of political content. In the preface, Barr Jr wrote of Meyer as a ‘fanatical functionalist’, celebrating instead ‘the most luxurious of modern German architects, Mies van der Rohe’.²⁰⁵ In the main text, Hitchcock and Johnson found functionalism to be acceptable in moderation, but rejected architects such as Meyer for whom ‘it is an absurdity to talk about the modern style in terms of aesthetics at all’.²⁰⁶ This was also evident in their cautious discussion of ‘Siedlungen’ (housing estates)—in a comment clearly aimed at Meyer and his ilk, they wrote ‘too often in European *Siedlungen* the functionalists build for some proletarian superman of the future’.²⁰⁷ They were largely mute on the subject of Soviet architecture, and the sole Russian building in the book, an Electro-Physical Laboratory in Moscow by the Government architects Nicolaiev and Fissenko, had a formalist caption—‘vertical and curved elements used with functional justification and aesthetic success’ (Fig. 40).²⁰⁸

Mies was their favoured architect—an experimental modernist with limited ideological baggage, the ideal Bauhaus replacement for the combative Meyer. After meeting Mies, Johnson praised him, according to Terence Riley, as ‘the greatest man I have ever met’.²⁰⁹ Mies’s first American commission was a refurbishment of Johnson’s New York apartment—Johnson’s new study was illustrated in *The International Style*. Johnson’s admiration of Mies was further evident in his comments on the 1931 Berlin Building Exposition, where he wrote that ‘the Mies home is admittedly luxurious...for this reason Mies is disliked by many architects and critics, especially the

²⁰⁴ William H. Jordy, ‘The International Style in the 1930s’, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, March 1965, p. 10.

²⁰⁵ Barr Jr, ‘Preface’, *The International Style*, p. 30.

²⁰⁶ Hitchcock and Johnson, *The International Style*, p. 51.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 104.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 237.

²⁰⁹ Philip Johnson to Mrs H. Johnson, Sept 1 1930, quoted in Terence Riley, *The International Style: Exhibition 15 and the Museum of Modern Art*, New York: Rizzoli, 1992, p. 23.

communists'.²¹⁰ Mies was presented as a 'post-functionalist', an antidote to Meyer with a stronger sense of beauty and space, derived from but not in thrall to function.

If Mies's relationship with the Nazi regime was complex—he was Director of the Bauhaus when it was closed down in 1932 but remained in Germany until 1937 after years of uneasy collaboration—then this aspect of his career did not diminish Johnson's admiration.²¹¹ Johnson's personal politics were at this stage nascent, yet intimations of his notorious future embrace of Nazism, exemplified by his accompaniment of Helen Appleton Read, the fanatical American supporter of the Nazis, with the press corps on the invasion of Poland, can be found in his speculative article 'Architecture in the Third Reich', published in *Hound and Horn* in 1933. According to Kazys Varnelis, Johnson had attended a Nazi rally at Nuremburg in 1932, which had stimulated his interest in Fascism and its American representative, Lawrence Dennis.²¹² Naturally, Johnson had little time for 'stupid attacks on modern art', but admitted that the Bauhaus style, with its lack of monumentality and associations of 'Communism and Marxism, Internationalism, all the "isms" not in vogue in Germany today', would have little purchase in the new climate.²¹³ Mies, on the other hand, was respected by conservatives for his rejection of functionalism, and promising signs of his acceptance by the new regime were evident in his securing of a commission to design the new Reichsbank. Johnson wrote that 'a good modern Reichsbank would satisfy the new craving for monumentality, but above all it would prove to the German intellectuals and to foreign countries that the new Germany is not bent on destroying all the splendid modern arts which have been built up in recent years.'²¹⁴ Although Mies's design (alongside all other modernist proposals) was personally rejected by Hitler, Johnson's optimistic account of

²¹⁰ Philip Johnson, 'In Berlin: Comment on Building Exposition', *New York Times*, 9 August 1932, reprinted in Johnson, *Writings*, p. 50.

²¹¹ Jon R. Snyder, 'Building, Thinking, and Politics: Mies, Heidegger, and the Nazis', *Journal of Architectural Education*, May 1993, p. 260. For a contemporary account, see Douglas Haskell, 'The Closing of the Bauhaus', *The Nation*, 19 October 1932, pp. 374-375.

²¹² Kazys Varnelis, "'We Cannot Know History": Philip Johnson's Politics and Cynical Survival', *Journal of Architectural Education*, November 1995, p. 92.

²¹³ Philip Johnson, 'Architecture in the Third Reich', *Hound and Horn*, October-December 1933, reprinted in Johnson, *Writings*, p. 53.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

an opportunistic architect situated the barbarism of Nazism in the aesthetic realm alone, cementing the prior status of Mies as the embodiment of the International Style.²¹⁵ Detached from its political moorings, the International Style was free to blow wherever the money was, even within a social order that was antithetical to internationalism.

Hitchcock and Johnson's *The International Style* was conceived in concert with MoMA's Modern Architecture: International Exhibition, a more balanced and restrained affair than the book, with a more equal international distribution of work. The main exhibitors, represented by models and photographs, were Wright, Gropius, Le Corbusier, J. J. Oud, Mies, Hood, Howe and Lescaze, Neutra, and the Bowman Brothers. In the catalogue, Hitchcock defended Wright's inclusion for his 'great individual genius', albeit noting 'an essential and insuperable difference between Wright and those architects throughout the world who work consciously or unconsciously in a single international style'.²¹⁶ The rest of the exhibition was made up of photographs, evenly spread across the countries covered in *The International Style*, and included two images of Kiesler's Film Guild Cinema. The catalogue itself featured essays on the main architects, historical and analytical notes on the International Style, and an analysis of housing by Mumford. With the exception of Mumford's polemic, these essays largely repeated the arguments of *The International Style*. For example, Meyer was once again lambasted as an architect producing work 'deliberately devoid of aesthetic interest'.²¹⁷ Gropius, his forbear at the Bauhaus, represented the extreme Left of the International Style—he was tainted with functionalism, but his faith in aesthetic possibilities rescued him from Hitchcock and Johnson's condemnation.

Barr Jr's foreword laid out the tenets of the International Style in plain terms, explaining the 'technical' and 'utilitarian' essence of the work. In the aforementioned MoMA pamphlet of 1931, Johnson had cited the importance of technology for modernist architecture. He wrote, 'modern architecture was born and exists in an era of applied science [and] does not fight the machine age but accepts it'.²¹⁸ The 'new style of

²¹⁵ Snyder, p. 263.

²¹⁶ Henry Russell Hitchcock, 'Frank Lloyd Wright', *Modern Art: International Exhibition*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932, p. 37.

²¹⁷ H. R. Hitchcock, 'Walter Gropius', *ibid*, p. 60.

²¹⁸ Philip Johnson, 'Built to Live In', p. 30.

architecture' witnessed the union of engineering and architecture.²¹⁹ William H. Jordy writes that Hitchcock and Johnson 'might easily have used the term "machine style" instead of the 'International Style', although the advantage of the latter was its neutrality'.²²⁰ The machine aesthetic that powered the International Style was treated directly in *Machine Art* of 1934, Barr Jr and Johnson's next major project at MoMA. Indeed, as Barr Jr put it in the *Machine Art* catalogue: 'machine art has been the principal influence which has purged the best post-war architecture from the compromises of both the "modernistic" and revivalist architects'.²²¹

This exhibition, of over four hundred machined objects, machine parts, and objects designed according to the machine aesthetic, celebrated the beauty of the machine outside of any broader rhetorical claims. Whereas the Machine-Age Exposition had been a summation of a 'romantic attitude', at *Machine Art* 'there are no purely ornamental objects; the useful objects were, however, chosen for their aesthetic quality'.²²² Nevertheless, Barr Jr's foreword was an instructive analysis of the machine in art and design. Machine art was analogous to the International Style in that it eschewed ornament, and Barr Jr showed a reticence towards function, writing that '“mechanical function” and “utilitarian function” are distant problems'.²²³ His short history of the machine as a motif of fine art was more striking. Alongside Futurists, such as Russolo and Balla, and the painters Léger and Baumeister, Barr Jr gave special consideration to the precision of Malevich, Lissitzky, and Mondrian, the 'mirthless laughter of Dadaism' in Picabia and Grosz, and the 'Russian constructivists, Tatlin, Gabo, Pevsner [who] employed the materials and something of the structural feeling of machinery'.²²⁴

Indeed, Barr Jr had extensive first-hand knowledge of Soviet culture from his trip to Russia over the winter of 1927 and 1928. His diary was published posthumously

²¹⁹ Ibid, p. 29.

²²⁰ William H. Jordy, *American Buildings and their Architects, Volume 5: The Impact of European Modernism in the Mid-Twentieth Century*, Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 118.

²²¹ Barr Jr, 'Foreword' to *Machine Art*, op. cit., non-paginated.

²²² Philip Johnson, 'History of Machine Art', ibid, non-paginated.

²²³ Barr Jr., 'Foreword' to *Machine Art*, op. cit., non-paginated.

²²⁴ Ibid.

(although his travelling companion Jere Abbott published two short excerpts from a diary in *Hound and Horn* in 1929), but some essays appeared following his return.²²⁵ In ‘The LEF and Soviet Art’, which was printed in *transition* in 1928, he wrote that ‘their spirit is rational, materialistic, their programme aggressively utilitarian. They despise the word “aesthetic”, they shun the bohemian implications of the word “artistic”. For them, theoretically, romantic individualism is abhorrent. They are communists’.²²⁶ Barr Jr had met some of the members, including Sergei Tretiakov and Rodchenko, and was clearly enchanted by their work and energy. He summed up:

the LEF is more than a symptom, more than an expression of a fresh culture or of post-revolutionary man; it is a courageous attempt to give to art an important social function in a world where, from one point of view, it has been prostituted for five centuries. The LEF is formed of men who are idealists of materialism; who have a certain advantage over the Alexandrian cults of the West—the *surréaliste* wizards, the esoteric word-jugglers, and those nostalgics who practice necromancy over the bones variously of Montezuma, Louis Philippe, or Thomas Aquinas. The LEF is strong in the illusion that men can live by bread alone.²²⁷

Such excited descriptions of Soviet culture would be unlikely in a MoMA catalogue. Yet a certain reserve in these statements was notable, which clearly grew over the following years as he moved from lecturing at Wellesley College to directing MoMA, as acknowledgement of the social implications of the work dissolved into aesthetic appreciation, settling into a determined dislike of functionalism.

Barr Jr’s complex negotiation of Soviet culture was especially evident in his 1929 ‘Notes on Russian Architecture’, which, somewhat ironically, was the source of the term ‘International Style’. He observed that in Russia ‘one meets an extravagant and envious respect for American technical proficiency and a corresponding contempt for American architectural design’ (with the exception of Wright’s work).²²⁸ Barr Jr cited work by

²²⁵ Alfred H. Barr Jr, ‘Russian Diary 1927-28’, *October*, Winter 1978; Jere Abbott, ‘Notes From a Soviet Diary’, *Hound and Horn*, April-June 1929, and July-September, 1929.

²²⁶ Barr Jr, ‘The LEF and Soviet Art’, *transition*, Fall 1928, reprinted in Alfred H. Barr Jr, *Selected Writings*, p. 138.

²²⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 140-141.

²²⁸ Alfred H. Barr Jr., ‘Notes on Russian Architecture’, *The Arts*, February 1929, p. 106.

Asnova and OSA as exemplary antidotes to the grim brutalism of the Lenin Institute, but found Asnova, excepting Lissitzky's work, to be prone to excess ornament and 'unfortunate heaviness'.²²⁹ OSA was 'purer', especially evident in chief architect Moise Ginsburg's work, which 'belongs to that international style of which Le Corbusier, Gropius, and Oud are perhaps the finest masters'.²³⁰ Alexander Burov's designs for the set designs for Sergei Eisenstein's 1929 film *The General Line* (Fig. 41) were also noted as exemplary Soviet architecture. Barr Jr offered a thorough examination of recent trends, privileging those which corresponded to the nascent International Style. Nominally apolitical, he contrasted Asnova's 1923 foundational aim 'to attempt to realize in architecture the principles of the USSR' and 'reciprocity between the architect-producer and the mass of proletariat-consumers' with Ginsburg's argument that 'the final task of the new architect, the correlation of the exterior volumes and the grouping of architectural masses, their rhythms and proportions, depends upon [the] primarily utilitarian structural method'.²³¹ For Barr Jr, this indicated 'progress', revealing his limited understanding of the politics of these groups.²³² As I pointed out above, OSA was the Constructivist corrective to the formalist Asnova. Yet Barr Jr also cited the impracticality of Soviet designers—Ginsburg's 1926 Dom Gostrak apartments (Fig. 42) 'may be taken as the epitome of modern Russian building, indeed of much of modern Russia, for it demonstrates clearly a theoretical mastery of a problem which has been executed with remarkable technical incompetence'.²³³ The International Style was the counter-measure to such mistakes and excesses—empty of a social function and defined by cool pragmatism, its muted logic was a more accurate corollary of the American machine than Constructivism had been.

The machines at Machine Art were not, in any case, the giant turbines and plants of the Machine-Age Exposition, but a pedantic selection of goods from laboratory equipment and hospital appliances, such as petri covers and sputum bowls, to luxurious household wares and trinkets, such as pretzel bowls and cigarette lighters. Terry Smith

²²⁹ Ibid, p. 104.

²³⁰ Ibid, p. 105.

²³¹ Asnova Manifesto and Moise Ginsburg, quoted in *ibid*, pp. 104-5.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid.

persuasively characterizes the exhibition: 'there is no scope for the irrational here, and the only individualism encouraged is the necessary subjectivity of experiencing the unspeakable, incommunicable beauty of a ball bearing by oneself'.²³⁴ As if to specify the immersion of machine art in everyday American consumerism, the prices of the objects were also listed. Johnson's brief 'History of Machine Art' neglected the Russians, but situated Germany as the centre of machine art in the Twentieth Century. He wrote 'as in architecture it was only after the War that designers realized the possibility of beauty in the construction of machines. In Germany particularly the post-war generation prided itself on achieving a mechanistic age and on designing the proper utensils for living in it'.²³⁵

A cool two-tone abstract cover by Josef Albers, formerly of the Bauhaus and then a teacher at Black Mountain College, married with Johnson's statements, as did a bibliography mainly featuring German books, including Gropius and Moholy-Nagy's *Neue Arbeiten der Bauhauswerkstätten* of 1925. Yet the objects on display were entirely American. To paraphrase one critic, Machine Art was an American hardware store version of Modernism, consonant with the encroaching corporate vision of Art promulgated at MoMA, where the museum itself was a type of department store.²³⁶

MoMA's profoundly commercial identity is worth considering briefly. Firstly, Nancy Einreinhofer writes that:

a Rockefeller...participated in the conception of the idea of the museum; a Rockefeller gave the land for the museum; the building resulted from Rockefeller donations, and the collection was built in large part with Rockefeller support. There has always been a Rockefeller on the Museum of Art boards, the Rockefeller philosophy of expansionism has prevailed.²³⁷

With Nelson A. Rockefeller as an exhibition committee member, Machine Art was not so much a testament to the big business interests of the Rockefeller dynasty, chiefly the

²³⁴ Terry Smith, *Making The Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America*, University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 394.

²³⁵ Johnson, 'History of Machine Art', op.cit. non-paginated.

²³⁶ A. Brenner, 'Art: Frontiers of Machine Art', *The Nation*, 28 March 1934, pp. 368-369.

²³⁷ Nancy Einreinhofer, *The American Art Museum: Elitism and Democracy*, Leicester University Press, 1997, p. 163.

Standard Oil empire, but a metaphor for the nascent MoMA's marketing strategies, and its comfortable equation with the quasi-aristocratic personages who governed the museum. The most influential figure, however, was the Director. Carol Duncan writes that 'Barr did not invent single-handedly what would become the MoMA's central art-historical narrative; but under his direction, the MoMA would develop it more than any other institution and promote it through a vigorous programme of acquisitions, exhibitions, and publications'.²³⁸ MoMA's greatest success was in establishing a 'narrative of Modernism': 'as the core narrative of the western world's premier collection of modern art for over half a century, it constituted the most authoritative history of modern art...[and]...to this day, modern museums (and modern wings in older museums) continue to tell its central gospel, as do almost all history of art textbooks'.²³⁹ Christoph Grunenberg writes that MoMA operated 'with the professionalism and efficiency of a company competing in the capitalist market economy', a precise and rational machine for marketing Modernism through a growing, eventually hegemonic, publishing concern, which promoted its wares via landmark exhibitions.²⁴⁰ He cites a confidential memo written by Barr Jr, in which the Museum's director stated baldly that 'basically, the Museum "produces" art knowledge, criticism, scholarship, understanding, taste' and thus 'the preparation of 'production' work is the stuff of which the Museum's prestige is made'.²⁴¹ MoMA's central narratives of formalism in art and the International Style in architecture ultimately became analogous to Modernism itself—uniform, rational units of culture, easily disseminated and reproduced, yet eviscerating difference and masking tension, eventually enabling the fictive counter-narrative of Postmodernism, which ironically was later championed by Johnson, now keen to disassociate himself from the grand political narratives that involved him in the years following *Machine Art*, such as his failed attempt to found the fascist 'Gray Shirts'.

²³⁸ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 106.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ Christoph Grunenberg, 'The Politics of Presentation: Museums, Galleries, and Exhibitions in New York 1929-47', PhD Thesis, London: Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 1994, p. 171.

²⁴¹ Barr, quoted in *ibid.*

MoMA was also skilful in generating publicity through mild controversy. The Modern Architecture: International Exhibition was accompanied by a manufactured scandal concerning the 1931 Architectural League exhibition. As far as Howe, Lescaze, Barr Jr, and Johnson were concerned, the League had been unfair in its refusal of young architects working in the International Style. Their response was a Rejected Architects exhibition, modelled on the famous Salon des Refusés that launched Impressionism. In a combative article in *Creative Art* Johnson had boasted that 'it remained for the Rejected Architects to give the International Style what might be called its introduction to this country'.²⁴² Howe and Lescaze went further the following year by resigning from the League. Their resignation was used to publicize the MoMA exhibition, and Barr and Johnson, who was now the first Director of the Department of Architecture, engaged the services of Edward Bernays, the pioneer of public relations. Bernays's campaign of propaganda brought the events to the front pages of the *New York Times*, resulting in ongoing public debates throughout the tenure of the exhibition and maximum attendance figures. Needless to say, many of the architects from the Rejected Architects exhibition were included in *The International Style* and the MoMA exhibition.

These early MoMA exhibitions were significantly indebted to the Machine-Age Exposition. MoMA split the earlier show into two discrete areas or departments, namely architecture and industrial design, and this division complemented the sterilization of the politics of the avant-garde. The compartmentalization of Modernism into specialized disciplines worked against the principles of the original avant-garde in Russia and Germany, countries that served as the source for the International Style. The revolutionary Gesamtkunstwerk of Constructivism re-emerged in America as a series of forms belonging to separate media, and was broken down into small packages that were eminently saleable.

²⁴² Philip Johnson, 'Rejected Architects', *Creative Art*, June 1931, reprinted in Johnson, *Writings*, p. 47.

The association with Bernays was therefore significant. His philosophies on marketing were centred on developing a 'mechanism which controls the public mind'.²⁴³ He wrote, in 1928, that:

the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country...We are governed, our minds are moulded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of.²⁴⁴

MoMA was, above all other institutions, effective in shaping the presentation of Modernism, emptying it of problematic politics, as evident in the barrage against Meyer, and distributing a version which could not contradict the ruling class interests that created and sustained the Museum. If Johnson drifted beyond such a position into the foggy regions of Fascism, to emerge unscathed at the end of the war, there was little in the corporate ideology of MoMA to hold him back from that following that course.

These exhibitions witnessed the transformation of International Constructivism into the International Style, a process facilitated by the Machine-Age Exposition. The quest for an overriding style had been a concern in Europe since the middle 19th century, and informed the foundation of the Deutsche Werkbund and later De Stijl.²⁴⁵ MoMA was ultimately successful in ensuring the realization of these aims via the conception of International Style, which according to Terence Riley 'has come to be near analogous to the history of Modernism in America'.²⁴⁶

MoMA disseminated Modernism with the skill of a public relations agency, helping the transition of avant-garde experiments into a neutral, business-friendly style. In the following chapter, I consider an attempt at realigning Constructivism with revolutionary politics, enacted by the New Playwrights Theatre. This group's chief asset was John Dos Passos, who had emerged as one of America's most experimental

²⁴³ Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* New York: Horace Liveright Press, 1928, Kennikat Press 1972, p. 18.

²⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 37.

²⁴⁵ Frederic J. Schwartz, *The Werkbund: Design Theory Before the First World War*, Yale University Press, 1996, pp. 18-24.

²⁴⁶ Riley, p. 11.

novelists with *Manhattan Transfer* of 1925. In *The 42nd Parallel* of 1930, the first instalment of the trilogy *USA*, Dos Passos's character J. Ward Moorehouse, a sinister public relations pioneer, tells Rotary Club members that 'American business has been slow to take advantage of the possibilities of modern publicity', and in facing the 'grave dangers of Socialism and demagoguery and worse' the answer lay in 'an educational campaign and an oral crusade that will drive home to the rank and file of the mighty Colossus of American uptodate industry'.²⁴⁷ In a sense, the New Playwrights tried to perform a counter movement to this process, claiming the machine for the American worker, but also warning of its dangerous appropriation as an ideological tool for maintaining order.

²⁴⁷ John Dos Passos, *The 42nd Parallel*, 1930, in *USA*, 1938, London: Penguin Classics, 2001, p. 231.

CHAPTER TWO

A Machine Age Theatre: Constructivism and the New Playwrights Theatre.

America was extravagantly prosperous and every hope, advantage, pleasure that the exulting middle class enjoyed became magnified a hundredfold and assumed proportions that were either ludicrous or magnificent and very often both. Underneath all this, of course, there lurked the strife, the violence, the despair that the stock market crash in 1929 and the crisis in 1931—made sufficiently clear.¹

Harold Clurman, 1934.

In the January 1928 issue of *Vanity Fair*, John Dos Passos heralded ‘A Machine Age Theatre’ that would ‘justify’ the ‘vast and tangled complex of ill-controlled machinery’, just as the ancient Greek theatre had justified war, plague, or natural disasters as the behaviour of the Gods.² He wrote ‘for New York, America, 1928, the question is what needs justifying to what. The theatre has to compete with other centers of mass-life, each with its own series of justifications’.³ These spanned the entire range of mass entertainments, from cabaret to baseball, and from the musical to the movies. Conversely, American theatre seemed aloof and removed from contemporary American life. Dos Passos argued ‘compare any play running in New York with the Twentieth Century Limited, which is no roaring novelty but a classic of American life. I defy anybody not to choose the Twentieth Century’.⁴ Against the experience of modernity offered by a high-speed train, New York theatre ‘in the year of radium 1928’ appeared antiquated and ossified.⁵ It was a lamentable situation in the clattering mechanical heart

¹ Harold Clurman ‘Foreword: A Preface to John Howard Lawson’ in John Howard Lawson, *With a Reckless Preface: Two Plays by John Howard Lawson*, New York: Farrar and Rinehardt, 1934, p. xx.

² John Dos Passos, ‘A Machine Age Theatre’, *Vanity Fair*, June 1928, p. 64.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

of the world's most technologically advanced society: 'it's as if you built a perfectly equipped up to date operating room in a hospital and then called in a Cherokee medicine man instead of a trained surgeon to carve up the patients'.⁶

The juxtaposition of the faith healer with the surgeon is redolent of a passage in Walter Benjamin's classic 1937 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility': 'magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into the web'.⁷ Dos Passos's pithy, witty remarks and Benjamin's extensive, complex polemic were distinct in tone and scope. Yet their concepts shared a mutual source—the Soviet Constructivist theatre. Benjamin claimed that the cinema audience was transformed into critical 'experts' by the camera eye's montage of the screen actor's performance, negating the 'cult value' inherent in the theatre, whereas the 'exhibition' value of photographic media 'distracted' the audience from passive absorption and compelled alert activism.⁸ This shattering of conventional illusions in cultural experience had previously been attempted by Vsevolod Meyerhold in the Russian theatre, and later in Germany by Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht, whose theories on theatre provided the framework for Benjamin's thesis. The influence of Constructivism on Dos Passos was apparent in the call for 'experts not artists'—for informed participants in society instead of feckless and wan bohemians festering in garrets. In a machine age of radiation, automobiles and Socialism, the sentimental chuntering of the pretentious playwright was outplayed by the movie. In contrast to Benjamin, who privileged the cinema, photography, and photomontage over the theatre (and painting, sculpture, etc), Dos Passos noted that 'the trouble is that the Roxy brand of justification is not intense enough to do anybody much good for long'.⁹ The solution, therefore, was a machine age theatre, an unmediated forum to engage the masses directly through the material culture of the machine age.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', 1937, in *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt, ed., trans. H. Zorn, London: Pimlico, 1999, p. 227.

⁸ 'Cult value' involved an engagement with the unique object, 'exhibition value' referred to the mechanically reproduced version that was available to a mass audience. Ibid, pp. 218-219.

⁹ Dos Passos, 'A Machine Age Theatre', p. 64.

As Dos Passos put it:

the theatre I'd like to see...would have the intellectual and physical equipment necessary to justify the ways of the machine to me, would combine the qualities of high mass and a prize fight, of a vaudeville bill and a communist meeting in Madison Square Garden. It would deal funnily, tragically, and grandiosely with every phase of modern life, not afraid of sex or political propaganda, always treating individual people in their relation to the mass movements of industrial life. A theatre of crowds and machinery and abstract colors and sounds and emotions, unsolemn, noisy, religious, and lewd. It would wring horse-laughs, belly-laughs, and snickers, sobs, tears, and an occasional thought out of its audience, and send them home tired and happy, with at least a temporary feeling that somebody could offer a clue to the interminable humdrum.¹⁰

A tall order, perhaps, but such an ambitious theatrical project was already underway in America, and naturally Dos Passos was one its founder members. The New Playwrights Theatre (hereafter NPT) was launched in 1927 by Mike Gold, John Howard Lawson, Em Jo Basshe, Francis Farragoh, and Dos Passos, grouping together five of New York's most political and experimental playwrights together. The NPT was a brave, eventually vain, stab at creating a Constructivist theatre in America. If it failed critically and commercially, finding no audience in the hostile climate of the Coolidge era, then it was distinguished as the most politically attuned attempt at realizing Constructivism in the American scene. Consequently, this chapter will chart the introduction of theatrical Constructivism into America and situate it in the contexts of the political and experimental theatres.

Ronald Wainscott writes that 'many so-called radical playwrights of the 1920s seemed to prefer experimental forms and styles, not only because they originated in Europe or signalled departure from...mainstream theatre, but because Realism was often identified by the left with emotionally based, nineteenth-century bourgeois art'.¹¹ For the NPT, the commitment to experimentation was a means of shifting the theatre away from the naturalist illusion of verisimilitude in political Realism towards an exaggerated theatrical experience that assaulted bourgeois values by appealing to the masses. Yet whilst there had previously been interactions between modernists and radicals in

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ronald Wainscott, *The Emergence of the Modern American Theatre 1914-1929*, Yale University Press, 1997, p.174.

American theatre, the most important precursor being the Provincetown Playhouse, experimentation and protest were by no means synonymous.

When theatrical Modernism arrived almost overnight around 1911, political theatre was marginal and artistically obtuse.¹² The most vehement political playwright was, as Ira A. Levine points out, Edward Sheldon, whose 1909 play *The Nigger* was concerned with racial issues, and whose 1911 work *The Boss* covered political and emotional strife during a strike.¹³ The gritty Realism of the play was matched in production with 'realistic' scenery, reinforcing the actuality of the corrupt capitalist Boss Regan. More artistically ambitious theatrical projects were underway, but these were separate from the political theatre. Wainscott cites the key events in the emergence of Modernism in the American theatre in 1911 as Robert Edmund Jones's spare, decorative designs for John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, the American publication of Edward Gordon Craig's pioneering 1905 treatise *On the Art of the Theatre*, and a season by the Irish Players of the Abbey Theatre, which was witnessed by Jones and Eugene O'Neill.¹⁴ In 1912 the Casino Theatre in New York staged Max Reinhardt's *Sumurun*, a play based on Friedrich Freska's *Tales of the Arabian Nights*, which married exotic subject matter with minimal décor, featuring a runway jutting through the proscenium into the audience, and simple sets with flat fields of single colours, indicating rather than stipulating the setting.¹⁵ Wainscott writes that 'this isolation of the performer working on platforms set against two-dimensional expanses of colour became a defining motif of American New Stagecraft designers and, by extension, of Expressionism'.¹⁶

¹² I refer here to the 'official' theatre, in contrast to the early immigrant workers' theatres recorded by Ben Blake, where 'Ibsen in the original language was staged by lanky Norwegian farmers on frosty winter evenings in Montana', and Ibsen, Gorky, and Hauptmann were performed 'at a time when the American little theatre movement was not even a far off dream'. Ben Blake, *The Awakening of the American Theatre*, New York: Tomorrow Publishers, 1935, p. 9.

¹³ Ira A. Levine, *Left-Wing Dramatic Theory in the American Theatre*, Ann Arbor: Michigan, UMI Research Press, 1985, p. 2.

¹⁴ Wainscott, *The Emergence of the Modern Theatre*, pp. 93-4.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 95.

¹⁶ Ibid.

The 'New Stagecraft' encompassed all the experiments in stage sets, costumes, lighting, and music from around 1911 onwards that were pitched against the ubiquitous Naturalism, a residue of America's Gilded Age that was most associated with the figure of David Belasco.¹⁷ Belasco's productions (Fig. 43), starting in the 1880s, were feted for the director's extraordinary attention to detail—for example, a scene set in San Francisco's Chinatown used the smell of tobacco smoke, 'the chink of money and the bickering chatter of unseen gamblers' to create the illusion of actuality.¹⁸ Naturalism was still the dominant mode of serious theatre production until after the war, outside of the gamut of cheap thrills on Broadway. Yet following *Sumurun* in 1911 a steadily growing audience for experimentation stimulated modernist theatre in America. These years witnessed the genesis of the little theatre movement, with the establishment of the Toy Theatre in Boston, the Wisconsin Dramatic Society, the Chicago Little Theatre, the Detroit Arts and Craft Theatre, and in New York of the Neighbourhood Playhouse, the Washington Square Players, and the Provincetown Players, who moved to New York in 1916. Coverage of the nascent American stagecraft as well as increasingly well-informed reports on the considerably more expanded modernist theatre in Europe appeared in cultural journals, such as *The Seven Arts* and *Harper's Weekly*, and dedicated journals, especially Sheldon Cheney's *Theatre Arts* (launched in 1916). The first major Exhibition of New Stagecraft, a definitive survey of the emerging modernist theatre in America with some European work, was held in New York in 1914.¹⁹

The New Stagecraft was a composite of varying theatrical tendencies, chiefly Symbolism and Expressionism. Mordecai Gorelik traced these traditions of anti-Naturalism back to the thundering Gesamtkunstwerke of Richard Wagner, whose Germanic 'pagan world of supermen, dragons, amazons and giants...in a misty region of dreams' was effectively evoked with 'suggestion, Symbolism, vagueness of outline, posteresque light and shadow and, most of all, impenetrable blending', as Naturalism

¹⁷ Gorelik deemed the term the 'most comprehensive', rather than rival terms such as 'Presentational Staging', 'The Plastic Stage', 'Expressionism', and 'The Theatre Theatrical'. Mordecai Gorelik *New Theatres For Old*, New York: Samuel French, 1940, p. 174. The 'Exhibition of the New Stagecraft', assembled by Sam Hume at the Art Institute of Chicago, December 1914-January 1915, cemented the term.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 161.

¹⁹ Waincott, *The Emergence of the Modern Theatre*, p. 96.

would have proved inadequate to the task.²⁰ The anti-Naturalism of Wagner's operas at Bayreuth was further developed by Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig—the former experimenting with electric lighting to create an intense atmosphere, and the latter stripping away the artifice of reality with elegant screens and towers barely indicating scenery (Fig. 44). Appia and Gordon Craig operated according to the loose rubric of Symbolism, a cluster of anti-Naturalist practices across several media, from Stéphane Mallarmé in literature to Edvard Munch in painting, which was predicated on valorising the concealment or substitution of meanings through symbols, codes and enigmas, defined by the exaggeration, simplification and distortion of reality. The Russian playwright Valery Briusov's 1910 'Against Naturalism in the Theatre' captured the essence of Symbolist anti-Naturalism: 'the creative urge is the only reality that exists on earth. Everything external is, in the poet's words, "only a dream, a fleeting dream"...let your setting aim not at truth, but at the suggestion of truth'.²¹ Thus, to counter what he termed the oppressive 'much' of Naturalism, its surfeit of detail, he argued that sets should be simple and free of 'unnecessary truth'.²² Symbolism itself had some impact in America, with such important productions as the New Theatre's *The Blue Bird* by Maurice Maeterlinck in 1910 and the Washington Square Players' version of Leonid Andreyev's *Life of Man* in 1917.²³

Expressionism had a greater currency. German Expressionism in the theatre dated back to the first decade of the century, with experiments such as Oscar Kokozschka's *Murderer, the Hope of Women* (*Mörder, Hoffnung der Frauen*, 1907) and Vassili Kandinsky's *The Yellow Sound* (*Gelbe Klang*, 1909) witnessing painters associated with Expressionism dabbling with theatrical form. Bert Cardullo and Robert Knopf cite the plays of Reinhard Sorge as the first proper examples of Expressionism in the theatre. Sorge's *The Beggar* (*Die Bettler*, 1912) 'introduced the chief element of Expressionist drama to the stage—the use of the central character's completely

²⁰ Gorelik, *New Theatres for Old*, p. 190.

²¹ Valery Briusov, 'Against Naturalism in the Theatre', 1910, reprinted in Bert Cardullo and Robert Knopf, eds., *Theater of the Avant-Garde 1890-1950: A Critical Anthology*, Yale University Press, 2001, p. 76.

²² Ibid, p. 73 and p. 76.

²³ Wainscott, *The Emergence of the Modern Theatre*, pp. 104-5.

subjective point of view to develop the action and distort the other characters'.²⁴ The boundary between dream and reality was blurred in *The Beggar*, and Sorge's stage directions called for angular spotlights on an otherwise dark stage, rooms with only red furniture, and outsized drumsticks used on toy drums to accompany the Nietzschean protagonist, 'The Poet', through his delirious, harrowing existence in Berlin.²⁵ *The Beggar* was initially an obscure, isolated instance—Sorge was killed in 1916 in France and his play was not produced until 1917. Subsequently Georg Kaiser, Ernst Toller, Leopold Jessner, and Arnolt Bronnen developed Sorge's Expressionism into a genre of theatre, predicated on intense subjectivity conveyed in distorted, often portentous, dream-like episodes.

Toller, in *Masses and Man* (*Masse Mensch*) of 1920 and *The Machine Wreckers* (*Die Maschinenstürmer*) of 1922 and Kaiser, in *From Morn to Midnight* (*Von Morgens bis mitternachts*, 1917) and *Gas* (1918) steered Expressionism towards industrial modernity. By focusing their work on industry and war, Kaiser and Toller were, as J. L. Styan points out, 'responsible for giving Expressionism an international flavour'.²⁶ Their departure from Symbolism was more pronounced than that of Kokoschka and Kandinsky, whose inner worlds were set in imaginary, antique or medieval scenes. In 1903 Kaiser had broken with the Munich Symbolist coterie of Stefan George precisely for its 'art for art's sake' tendencies.²⁷ *From Morn to Midnight* 'depicted the fragmentation of German middle-class identity in the context of capitalist alienation' (Fig. 45).²⁸ With the action divided into seven stations, the play concerns the lamentable regimented existence of 'The Cashier', a worker in a claustrophobic bank.²⁹ Toller's *Masses and Man* (Fig. 46) was more overtly political—many of his plays were written during a lengthy prison sentence for revolutionary activities. The play was dedicated to the 'World Revolution', yet was constructed of several dream sequences, set in a

²⁴ Cardullo and Knopf, *Theater of the Avant-Garde*, p.207.

²⁵ Reinhard Sorge, *The Beggar*, 1912, trans. W. H. Sokel and J. Sokel, in *ibid*.

²⁶ J. L. Styan, *Expressionism and Epic Theatre*, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 47.

²⁷ *Ibid*.

²⁸ David F. Kuhns, *German Expressionist Theatre: The Actor and the Stage*, Cambridge University Press, p. 219.

²⁹ Styan, *Expressionism and Epic Theatre*, p. 49.

worker's inn, a stock exchange, a political demonstration, and a prison, with a giant birdcage representing a prison cell. In Kaiser and Toller's plays, Expressionism moved from the angst of the individual to the crisis of the collective.

Their plays were performed in America throughout the 1920s—*Masses and Man* was produced by the Theatre Guild, formerly the Washington Square Players, in 1924, with sets by Lee Simonson, and Kaiser's *From Morn to Midnight* was staged at the Garrick Theatre in 1921, and was also produced at the Theatre Guild.³⁰ Knowledge of theatrical Expressionism was limited before 1921 to occasional reports from Germany. Knowledge of Expressionism in painting was more limited, despite Alfred Stieglitz's championing of Kandinsky and missives from the expatriate painter Marsden Hartley. The key event was actually non-theatrical—the 1921 release of Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, discussed in Chapter Four, had a greater impact than any single play in generating interest in Expressionism. Unlike the original German model, however, Expressionism in America was an umbrella term which denoted, according to Wainscott, 'any kind of theatrical experiment except Symbolism—the only stylized form that was well established in New York before 1921'.³¹ In contrast to the angular, jagged 'mindscape' of German Expressionism, American Expressionism included any form of distorted narrative or heightened subjectivity. Gorelik wrote that 'transferred to the United States the expressionistic mode found itself considerably toned down'.³² The American version of Expressionism was thus a grafting of German stylistic experiments onto Symbolist theatre.

The Provincetown Players produced the most significant early examples of American Expressionism. It was also the theatre that most combined Modernism with politics before the NPT. The Provincetown Players were gathered together in 1915 by George Cram Cook, and officially founded in September 1916. With improvised sets by Robert Edmund Jones, who had studied under Reinhardt, casts drawn from friends and associates, and original plays by Eugene O'Neill, Susan Glaspell, and John Reed

³⁰ The Theatre Guild produced several experimental European plays, for example Nikolai Evreinov's *A Merry Death* in 1916, Leonid Andreyev's *He Who Gets Slapped* and Karel Capek's *R.U.R.* in 1922, and Franz Werfel's *Goat Song* in 1926.

³¹ Wainscott, *The Emergence of the Modern Theatre*, p. 92.

³² Gorelik, *New Theatres for Old*, p. 253.

performed in a former fish warehouse on a wharf in Provincetown, Massachusetts, the Provincetown Players battled the commercialism and low intellectual range of Broadway. They moved to New York in 1916, founding the Playwrights Theatre on MacDougal Street and allying themselves with *The Masses*, which had been founded in 1911 by Piet Vlag. *The Masses* served up a potent brew of cultural and political radicalism, the ‘artistic obstreperousness and revolutionary zeal’ that was welling in bohemian enclaves across America.³³ As Brenda Murphy points out, whilst *The Masses* was socialist in Eastman’s editorial line, the Provincetown Players were politically loose knit.³⁴ Many, such as Cook and O’Neill, were inclined towards Anarchism, although more in the cultural ‘anarchistic’ sense than in the revolutionary model propounded by Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, who were loosely affiliated to the group. With a large number of female members, the theatre was also an important forum for feminist debates and included the activist Edna Kenton.³⁵

The plays performed in the early years, such as Glaspell’s *Trifles*, O’Neill’s *Thirst*, and Reed’s *The Eternal Quadrangle*, were ‘within the realm of Realism’, as Murphy puts it, and sought to convey ‘a believable illusion that what is taking place on the stage is an objective representation of the audience’s shared reality’.³⁶ The Naturalism of the early productions was gradually transformed by increased experimentation in the early 1920s. Glaspell’s *The Verge* of 1921 marked the partial introduction of Expressionism into the Provincetown Players’ productions. Her stage directions for Act II found the protagonist, the harried Claire:

alone in the tower—a tower which is thought to be round but does not complete the circle. The back is curved, then jagged lines break from that, and the front is a queer bulging window...the whole structure is as given a twist by some terrific force—like something wrung. It is lighted by an old-fashioned watchman’s lantern hanging from the ceiling; the innumerable pricks and slits in the metal throw a marvellous pattern on the curved wall like some masonry that hasn’t been.³⁷

³³ Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, New York: Avon Books, 1961, p. 41.

³⁴ Brenda Murphy, *The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 33-34.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 37.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 55.

³⁷ Susan Glaspell, *The Verge*, 1921, London: Ernest Benn Ltd, 1924, p. 47

Wainscott writes that whilst *The Verge* pioneered Expressionism in American theatre, 'strictly speaking, the play is not expressionistic in the way German plays of the style are, but the scenic needs...and the protagonist's spiral into madness which is complicated at times by her breaking into spontaneous verse, sets it apart from realistic presentations, including the production of all Glaspell's plays'.³⁸ As Steven Frank points out, *The Verge* was greeted with bemused enthusiasm, with some reviewers likening the second act to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.³⁹

O'Neill's plays of this period, in particular *The Emperor Jones* of 1920 and *The Hairy Ape* of 1921, were conceived during a period of immersion in Expressionist works such as *From Morn to Midnight* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, although he later angrily denied any Expressionist influence.⁴⁰ Yet the spectral terrors in the forest in *The Emperor Jones* (Fig. 47) and the blind impotent rage of Yank in *The Hairy Ape* witnessed Naturalism overshadowed by intensified atmosphere, heightened in the productions by the use of sound, with steadily escalating drums in the former and the din of a ship's stokehole in the latter, in what Gorelik termed 'an assault on the senses of the spectator'.⁴¹ Dramatic lighting likewise enhanced the tense, nightmarish atmosphere of these plays. The stage sets themselves—*The Emperor Jones* was designed by Cleon

³⁸ Wainscott, *The Emergence of the Modern Theatre*, p. 114.

³⁹ Steven Frank, 'On "The Verge" of a New Form: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and Susan Glaspell's Experiments in *The Verge*', in Arthur Gerwitz and James Kolb, eds., *Experimenters, Rebels, and Disparate Voices*, Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003, p.118. Frank quotes Kenneth MacGowan's report in the *New York Globe* that the 'second act has an expressionistic setting by Cleon Throckmorton. A tower room with lantern-flecked walls seen through a crazily latticed window, almost out of "Caligari" '.

⁴⁰ Barrett H. Clark, *Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays*, New York: Robert M. McBride and Company, 1929, p.125. Clark summarized a 1926 interview with O'Neill: ' "The first Expressionistic play that I ever saw" he answered, "was Kaiser's *From Morn to Midnight*, produced in New York in 1922, after I'd written both *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*. I had read *From Morn to Midnight* before *The Hairy Ape* was written, but not before the idea for it was planned. The point is that *The Hairy Ape* is a direct descendent of *Jones*, written long before I had ever heard of Expressionism, and its form needs no explanation but this. As a matter of fact, I did not think much of *From Morn to Midnight*, and still don't. It is too easy. It would not have influenced me". Whether he has read or heard about Kaiser's *Gas* trilogy I can't say, but *Dynamo* offers certain parallels to that remarkable work'.

⁴¹ Gorelik, *New Theatres for Old*, p. 232.

Throckmorton and *The Hairy Ape* by Throckmorton and Jones—were ‘expressionistic’, more formally tentative and regular than the spiky angularity of German Expressionism.

In 1923, the Theatre Guild staged Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine* at the Garrick Theatre (Fig. 48). In a foreword to the published version, Theatre Guild director Philip Moeller wrote that ‘expressionistically Mr Rice has exposed the minds and souls of his people...pitilessly, with a curious conglomeration of tenderness and scorn, he has studied the rich barrenness and the ridiculous unbeauty of those “white-collar” slaves’.⁴² The play concerned the trials of Mr Zero, a department store clerk threatened with replacement by the eponymous machine. His work plagues him with anxiety about his essential humanity: ‘what do you think I am—a machine?’, he says to a colleague.⁴³ Many of the characters have numbers for names—Mr One, Mrs One, Mr Two, Mrs Two etc. As Zero is made redundant by ‘The Boss’, the latter’s desk begins slowly revolving to the sound of merry-go-round music.⁴⁴ The desk revolves faster as the tempo of the music increases, with The Boss shouting mechanical apologies amidst the cacophony:

‘I’m sorry—no other...alternative—greatly regret—old
employee—efficiency—economy—business—*business*—BUSINESS—’.⁴⁵

The spinning ‘brain storm’ climaxes in a massive explosion, and later it transpires that Zero has murdered The Boss. The play ends with the executed Zero working manically on a giant adding machine in Purgatory, a man destroyed by an unforgiving corporate world but unable to escape its strictures, even in death.⁴⁶ The tone of *The Adding Machine* was ironic rather than tragic, and Expressionist devices—intensified sound, dramatic lighting, outsized props, and the crisis of the self in society—were applied with

⁴² P. Moeller, ‘Foreword’ to Elmer Rice, *The Adding Machine*, in *Seven Plays by Elmer Rice*, New York: The Viking Press, 1950

⁴³ Rice, *The Adding Machine*, p. 19.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 29.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Rice’s politics at this stage are unclear, but during the Depression he became a significant force in the New Deal theatre programmes, and headed the Federal Theatre Project in New York in 1935.

barbed satire. The set design by Lee Simonson mixed distorted angularity with the regulated geometry of the American metropolis.

In the same year the Equity Players produced Lawson's *Roger Bloomer* at the Equity 48 Street Theatre. A veteran of the ambulance corps and wartime comrade of Dos Passos, Lawson had stayed in France and absorbed the Parisian cultural world. As Julia A. Walker relays, he was truculent about the experimental theatre he had witnessed in Europe, which included 'some Middle European Expressionist play', as 'the avant-garde plays were unsatisfactory because they seemed so remote from the savage reality of the streets'.⁴⁷ *Roger Bloomer* was the story of a young man's rebellion in a dour Iowa town—John D. Shout writes that 'if Lawson intends to be the American Georg Kaiser...his milieu is that of Sinclair Lewis and Sherwood Anderson', the satirists of small town life in *Main Street* (1920) and *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) respectively.⁴⁸ The narrative follows Roger's escape from a dull, oppressive family life to New York, where his hopes are dashed working as an alienated Wall Street underling and his life darkens when implicated in the death of Louise, his only friend in the city (he is imprisoned as a 'material witness' of her suicide).⁴⁹ As the play develops, the initial Naturalism fragments, and by the time Roger is incarcerated the action follows the imaginary events of Roger's dreams. Lawson's stage directions stated:

Roger's dream is a nightmare of pursuit.

This follows technique of a very rapid ballet, with accompaniment of words half chanted. Playing time is extremely short, for it is done at great speed, like a piece of exciting music.⁵⁰

As well as sound effects, 'pale green light spreads over the floor, luminous, mystic', and adds to the disquieting sequence of 'strophes', where Roger is surrounded by all the play's characters dressed in black, tortured by grotesque imaginings of a hideous orgy,

⁴⁷ John Howard Lawson, unpublished autobiography, cited in Julia A. Walker, *Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre: Bodies, Voices, Words*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 189.

⁴⁸ John D. Shout, 'The Idiosyncratic Theatre of John Howard Lawson', in Gerwitz and Kolb, p. 14.

⁴⁹ John Howard Lawson, *Roger Bloomer*, New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1923, p. 188.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

and is finally reprieved by the ghost of Louise.⁵¹ At a second run at the Greenwich Theatre, the Equity Players' prosaic scenery was replaced with 'black drapes and unrealistic, brightly painted cut-outs' that caused one reviewer to remark that *Roger Bloomer* was 'by far the most complete and technically perfect example of dramatic Expressionism that has reached us yet' (Fig. 49).⁵²

In 1925 the Theatre Guild produced Lawson's *Processional: A Jazz Symphony of American Life*, a four-act play that was arguably the cornerstone of the NPT. The anti-Naturalism of this irreverent farce was a residue of Expressionism, but Lawson's introduction of jazz and vaudeville created a carnival fanfare where the concerns of the collective outweighed the dilemma of the individual. *Processional* is set in a West Virginia mining town on the Fourth of July. The meaning of the title is established in Act I Scene I as the 'Jazz Miners', a jazz band with blackened faces, emerge from the rear of the auditorium and parade down to the stage. The convoluted plot of the play is set in the shadow of a strike in which miners and soldiers have violently clashed. One of the miners is protagonist 'Dynamite Jim', who after escaping from prison for unspecified strike activities indulges in a spree of depravity in which he rapes a woman, called Sadie, and kills a soldier who had tried to stop the rape. Jim is then blinded by the Klu Klux Klan for impregnating Sadie. In an unexpected twist, Jim manages to rescue Sadie from the Klan, who aim to punish her for immorality. In gratitude Sadie marries Jim in a jazz wedding, and the play ends with a procession leaving the stage and marching through the audience. In the celebratory finale, the Klan is disbanded and the strike is resolved in a peaceful reconciliation of capitalist boss and communist agitator.

In his preface to the published version, Lawson remarked that he had:

endeavoured to create a method which shall express the American scene in native idiom, a method as far removed from the older Realism as from the facile mood of

⁵¹ Ibid, pp. 196-7. Mardi Valgamae argues that, like O'Neill's, Lawson's dismissal of the influence of Expressionism with the plea of ignorance, as he claimed in a letter of March 18 1923 to the *New York Times*, was less than honest—he later informed Valgamae that he had been familiar with Toller and Walter Havensclever. Mardi Valgamae, *Accelerated Grimace: Expressionism in the American Drama of the 1920s*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1972, p. 73.

⁵² Valgamae, p. 76; John Corbin, *New York Times*, 11 March, 1923, Section X, p. 1.

Expressionism. It is apparent that this new technique is essentially vaudevillesque in character—a development, a moulding to my own uses, of the rich vitality of the two-a-day and the musical extravaganza.⁵³

The ‘national consciousness’ was invoked through the colloquial dialogue, the comic moments, and the use of popular music. Yet whilst championing America popular culture against the bourgeois theatre and the upmarket entertainments of Broadway, Lawson made a loose reference to Expressionist thinking, as he applied the term ‘inner necessity’, redolent of Kandinsky’s 1910 *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*: ‘The reality of America spiritually and materially, is a movement, a rhythm of which inner meaning has not been found. Buried under the hokum of advertisements, headlines, radio speeches, there is a genuine inner necessity, a sense of direction’.⁵⁴

Mordecai Gorelik designed *Processional* (Fig. 50 and Fig. 51) with a nod towards technological Modernism, and the backdrop in Act II was reminiscent of Precisionist or Neue Sachlichkeit paintings. As Anne Fletcher explains, Gorelik’s sources also included burlesque and vaudeville, Expressionism, and Sergei Soudeikine’s designs for the Russian cabaret.⁵⁵ Dos Passos commented on the play that Lawson and Gorelik’s aim had been to abandon the proscenium:

Processional is the first American play in our generation in which the convention of the fourth wall has been frankly and definitely abandoned. In other plays, the subterfuge of a dream has been used to placate the critics whenever the author felt he needed to be positively theatrical.⁵⁶

The practices of popular theatre, ‘burlesque, musical comedy, and vaudeville’, had been ‘employed with passionate seriousness’ to ensure that audience would not be lulled into

⁵³ John Howard Lawson, ‘Preface’ to *Processional: A Jazz Symphony of American Life in Four Acts*, New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1925, p. v.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. viii.

⁵⁵ Anne Fletcher, ‘Against the Tide: Mordecai Gorelik and the New York Theatre of the 1920s—*Processional*, *Nirvana*, *The Moon is a Gong*, and *Loudspeaker*’, in Gerwitz and Kolb, p. 149.

⁵⁶ John Dos Passos, ‘Is the “Realistic” Theatre Obsolete?’, *Vanity Fair*, May 1925, p. 114.

imagining an actual scene.⁵⁷ Despite the departure from Naturalism, the audience should be unable to escape from the truth of the political narrative. Lawson had stated in his preface: ‘Art as an escape from life is no better than morphine, rotary clubs, murder, speech-making, or any of the other methods used by hundred-per-cent Americans to escape from actuality’.⁵⁸

These statements were not exactly novel. In 1907 Meyerhold had proclaimed—‘We intend the audience not merely to observe, but to participate in a *corporate* [bodily] creative act’.⁵⁹ The destruction of the fourth wall, by the negation of curtain and the proscenium, was later central to the Constructivist theatre that Meyerhold developed after the Revolution. In 1920, he claimed that ‘the modern theatre wants to move out into the open air. We want our setting to be an iron pipe or the open sea or something constructed by the new man [for] such settings...have the advantage of getting us out of the old theatre’.⁶⁰ Alexander Bakshy summarized Meyerhold’s position: ‘Constructivism does not recognize art as a form of aesthetic experience—which, it declares, is a purely bourgeois method of intellectual self-indulgence. Communist or proletarian art has no use for aesthetics’.⁶¹ With the division between art and life removed, there was no need for conventions of illusion.

The Russian-born Bakshy had reported on Russian theatre before the Revolution. His 1916 work *The Path of the Modern Russian Stage* provided an early account in the English language (it was published in London) of Meyerhold’s developments as a director, from his time with the Moscow Art Theatre onwards. The Moscow Art Theatre was founded in 1897 by Konstantin Alexeyev and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, but became synonymous with the star director Konstantin Stanislavsky and his commitment to Naturalism. Yet Bakshy’s account focused more on the Meyerhold years and the ‘tentative efforts of the Moscow Art Theatre to move beyond the naturalistic’.⁶²

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Lawson, ‘Preface’, *Processional*, p. ix.

⁵⁹ Vsevolod Meyerhold, ‘The Stylized Theatre’, 1907, in E. Braun, ed. and trans., *Meyerhold on Theatre*, London: Eyre Methuen, 1969, p. 60.

⁶⁰ Vsevolod Meyerhold, ‘Speech at an Open Debate on *The Dawn*’, 1920, in *ibid.*, p. 174.

⁶¹ Alexander Bakshy, ‘Vsevolod Meierhold’, *The Nation*, 11 May 1927, p. 535.

⁶² Alexander Bakshy, *The Path of the Modern Russian Stage*, London: Cecil, Palmer, and Hayward, 1916, p. 54.

Given that Bakshy's book also included an essay on Gordon Craig and a treatise on cinema, this preference for Meyerhold's new techniques over Stanislavsky's Naturalism reflected the author's preference for experimentation. Meyerhold had joined the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898 as an actor dedicated to Naturalism, but by 1902 was clashing frequently with Stanislavsky over Symbolism, and broke with him in 1906 (initiating a process of rejoining and resigning which would carry on until after the Revolution). In 1907 Meyerhold called for a 'stylized theatre' that was 'opposed to the techniques of illusion', which would dismantle naturalist conventions—such as footlights, proscenium, and mise-en-scène settings—for, he argued, 'the stylized theatre produces a play in such a way that the spectator is compelled to employ his imagination *creatively* in order to fill in those details suggested by the stage action'.⁶³ Naturalism obstructed the dramatic interpretation of the text by the actor, whereas the stylized theatre 'employs statuesque plasticity to strengthen the impression made by certain groupings on the spectator's memory, so that the fatal notes of tragedy sound through the spoken dialogue'.⁶⁴ Bakshy wrote that whereas 'the Art Theatre placed the centre of gravity of the production on the stage, Meyerhold transferred it to the audience' and concluded that 'since it was difficult to transform a performance into an episode of real life, the idea presented itself to the producer to try the opposite effect, i.e. to transform an episode of real life into a performance'.⁶⁵ This was the basis of Constructivist theatre—members of the audience were engaged as participants in the theatre of real life.

In 1920, Oliver Sayler relayed these developments in *The Russian Theatre under the Revolution*, the earliest American study of the Soviet theatre, researched during his stay in Moscow from November 1917 to February 1918. It was a more even-handed account than Bakshy's, and introduced an American audience to the leaders of the new Soviet theatre, as well as providing a detailed history of Russian theatre since the Moscow Art Theatre. Having noted that the Moscow Art Theatre was still thriving, Sayler discussed other groups, chiefly the Kamerny Theatre in Moscow, founded in

⁶³ Meyerhold, 'The Stylized Theatre', p. 63.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Bakshy, *The Path of the Modern Russian Stage*, p. 58 and p. 94.

1914 by director Alexander Tairov and actress Alice Koonen, which was a ‘theatre of revolt’, and Meyerhold’s productions at the Alexandrinsky Theatre in Petrograd, an adjunct of the Moscow Art Theatre. As Konstantin Rudnitsky notes, Tairov’s theatre was a riposte to both Stanislavsky’s literary Naturalism and Meyerhold’s theatricality, and was conceived initially in the tradition of the grotesque masquerades of the *Commedia dell’Arte*.⁶⁶ Sayler wrote that in post-revolutionary Russia ‘the Kamerny... is a revolutionary theatre in an artistic and not in a political sense...its members would rather discuss light and colour and posture than the future of the State’.⁶⁷ Kamerny productions (Fig. 52) were frenzies of colour and movement, with actors performing balletic masques in front of cubo-futurist sets by Alexandra Exter. Sayler applauded Tairov’s production of Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* for its fiercely modernist aesthetic, from the ‘grotesque’ black and gold curtain designed by Exter to Koonen’s ‘impassioned action’ as the protagonist. He found Meyerhold in a period of transition at a financially troubled theatre, yet this situation actually facilitated realizing his vision of a theatre without illusionism as *Don Juan* was staged ‘with no illusion...under the full lights of the auditorium, curtain removed and apron extended twenty feet beyond the proscenium arch’.⁶⁸ Yet Sayler’s opinion that ‘the most universal theory of the theatre in Russia...is that the theatre is an art and that every one concerned with it must be an artist’ was outdated by 1920, and his unwillingness to situate the new theatre in a political context revealed that he was concerned entirely with an art theatre model.

In the following years, Soviet theatre was featured periodically in the theatre press, with occasional reference to work outside the main three theatres. In April 1923 *Theatre Arts Monthly*, a feature on the Kamerny Theatre included a photograph of a production by the Proletkul’t group of Jack London’s *The Mexican* (Fig. 53). In fact, radical American writers, such as London and Upton Sinclair, were often translated to the Russian stage in the 1920s. There was also some coverage in the Left wing press, such as Ruth Epperson Kennell’s appraisal of the 1925 to 1926 theatre season in

⁶⁶ Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, trans. Roxanne Permar, London: Thames and Hudson, 1988, p. 15

⁶⁷ Oliver Sayler, *The Russian Theatre Under the Revolution*, Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1920, p. 135.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 208.

Moscow in *The Daily Worker*, which focused mostly on the Moscow Art Theatre.⁶⁹ However, the first major synthetic study of the Russian theatre was actually written by an Englishman. Huntley Carter's *The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia* was first published in 1924, appearing in America in 1926, where it was glowingly reviewed in *New Masses* as the best study of the theatre since the writings of Gordon Craig.⁷⁰

Carter was considerably more attuned than Bakshy and Sayler to the political currents in Soviet theatre, although he emphasized that his interest lay in 'ideas which can be separated from revolutionary politics and propaganda'.⁷¹ Nevertheless, he surveyed the whole spectrum of theatre production (with a short section on cinema) in the Soviet Union, from the Moscow Art Theatre to the State Circus, illustrated with photographs and woodcuts, and complemented with an exhaustive appendix detailing the vast range of theatre productions since the Revolution. He identified three main areas of production and situated them in 'Left', 'Centre', and 'Right' groups. The Left included Meyerhold, Proletkul't, club and factory theatres, open-air mass and street theatres, street pageants and workers' cafes chantants, and the little theatres of revolutionary satire. The Centre group consisted of Lunacharsky's theatre, the Kamerny Theatre, the Central Jewish Theatre, the Old Jewish Theatre, the Children's Theatre, and the State Circus. The Right was the smallest group with Stanislavsky's theatre, the studio theatres, and various 'post-NEP theatres'.⁷²

Carter wrote that 'nowadays Meyerhold personifies Communism'.⁷³ Since the director joined Bolshevik Party in August 1918, his stylistically revolutionary staging and acting methods had become aligned with the Revolution. Carter provided a glossary-cum-chronology of Meyerhold's theories on 'Construction' and 'Bio-Mechanics', the two main concerns at the RSFSR (Russian Socialist Federal Soviet

⁶⁹ Ruth Epperson Kennell, 'The Theatre Season in Moscow, 1925-1926', *The Daily Worker*, 12 September 1926. *Soviet Russia* and *Soviet Russia Pictorial* also covered Russian theatre. See B. Roustam Bek 'The Theatres in Petrograd', *Soviet Russia*, August 1921; N. Ausübel, 'The Stage and Revolution', *Soviet Russia Pictorial*, February 1923; 'Soviet Theatre Developments', *Soviet Russia Pictorial*, October 1924.

⁷⁰ Harbor Allen, 'A Vigorous New Theatre', *New Masses*, September 1926, p. 25.

⁷¹ Huntley Carter, *The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia*, London: Chapman and Dodd, 1924, p. xii.

⁷² *Ibid*, pp. xvii-xviii.

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 51.

Republic) Theatre No.1, a part of the Petrograd TEO (Theatrical Department)

Narkomprosa (People's Commissariat of Education). Construction was based on:

building—utility—the Machine—the new conception of the Machine—as a moral factor—the worker as master of the machine, reproducing its sounds and movements which to him are a second nature—the working out of a constructive background subordinated to him, scenery as a material aid—such is the logical association of ideas.⁷⁴

'Construction' concerned staging and was imbued with the logic of the engineer rather than the artist, and 'Bio-Mechanics' referred to the 'application of the construction or mechanical theory to the actor', or 'worker-actor'.⁷⁵ Bio-Mechanics was therefore the utilization of the body's movements in the most efficient way. Instead of using gestures to express emotion or the self, in Bio-Mechanics the body was a machine that could be controlled through standard patterns of movement.⁷⁶ Meyerhold modelled his principle on Taylor's organization of labour: 'the methods of Taylorism may be applied to the work of the actor in the same way as they are to any form of work with the aim of maximum productivity'.⁷⁷ Bio-Mechanics called for the absence of unnecessary movements, a focus on rhythm, 'the correct positioning of the body's centre of gravity', and stability.⁷⁸ The first major instance of Bio-Mechanics and Construction in a stage play was Meyerhold's production of F. Crommelinck's *The Magnanimous Cuckold* in 1922 at the Nezlobin Theatre. The set by Liubov Popova was itself a machine—a wooden construction of platforms, steps, and rotating cogs standing free against the bare walls of the specially gutted theatre. Proscenium, wings, curtains, and all the residual conventions of theatre were thereby demolished. Meyerhold recalled in 1926 that 'the aim was to lay every line of the setting completely bare, and the device was pursued to the limit of schematization'.⁷⁹ The actors, who were attired in identical blue uniforms, clambered over the construction performing acrobatic stunts and rhythmic, mechanical

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 69.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 70.

⁷⁶ Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre*, p. 93.

⁷⁷ Vsevolod Meyerhold, 'Bio-Mechanics', 1922, in *Meyerhold on Theatre* p. 197.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 198.

⁷⁹ Vsevolod Meyerhold, 'The Magnanimous Cuckold', 1926, in *Meyerhold on Theatre*, p. 204.

movements. As Rudnitsky writes, 'from this moment the artist was essentially banished from the theatre. In his place entered the engineer, the constructor'.⁸⁰

In explaining Meyerhold's Constructivism, Carter astutely noted that many of the Constructivists, such as Mayakovsky and Blok, had emerged from the Russian variant of Futurism, and thus 'probably Meyerhold derived the machine idea not from Marxism but from Marinettism, with its modernolatry, the idealization and worship of the Machine, its movements and sounds and the attempt to express them in forms of art'.⁸¹ If Meyerhold frequently staged plays that had a less idealized view on the machine, such as Toller's *Masses and Man* and *Machine Wreckers*, Kaiser's *Gas*, and Karel Capek's *R.U.R.*, this was to assert the 'moral side to the machine' available only in the Soviet Union.⁸² This seemed to Carter to be a 'paradox'.⁸³ Rudnitsky writes that:

Technology, industrialization and the machine instilled fear in the expressionist dramatists, for they perceived mechanization as a means of depriving mankind of individuality, of turning him into a spineless, spiritless adjunct of the machine, a robot obedient to the capitalist boss.⁸⁴

On the other hand 'Soviet directors...regarded technology with admiration and hope since only industrialization could lead the country out of devastation'.⁸⁵ The machine paradox also lay at the heart of the NPT, and is discussed below.

Carter also reported on the whole range of theatrical activities by workers' groups.⁸⁶ Paramount was Proletkul't—an abbreviation of 'Proletarskaya kultura'—the leading organization for workers' 'self-expression', 'self-explanation', and 'self-publication'.⁸⁷ The various Proletkul't theatres were formed in 1918 as facets of the larger Proletkul't movement, which was founded in 1917 by Alexander Bogdanov and Anatoly Lunacharsky, who became the People's Commissar for Education in the new

⁸⁰ Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre*, p. 92.

⁸¹ Carter, *The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia*, p. 71.

⁸² Ibid, p. 80.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre*, p.100.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Carter, *The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia*, p.81.

⁸⁷ Ibid, pp. 81-82.

regime. Both Bogdanov and Lunacharsky agreed that art should function as a weapon in class war, although, as James McClelland writes, differed greatly in their approaches to proletarian culture—Bogdanov, the political philosopher, adopting a hard, scientific method and Lunacharsky, a published playwright, being more concerned with aesthetics and ethics.⁸⁸ Ignoring Bogdanov, Carter quoted extensively from Lunacharsky's 'The Beginning of a Proletarian Aesthetic', an essay that engaged with the problematic of machine art. If the bourgeoisie and the proletariat shared an adulation of the machine, then the former revelled in its profit making abilities whilst the latter judged it as the means of achieving Socialism—the proletarian aesthetic therefore used the machine as a signifier of a collective future. Carter summarized the argument:

Collectivism is a big thing. So is the Machine. Morally considered, is it not a symbol of Collectivist Society? And Collectivist Society is Society Unbound. With such ideas before them, is it any wonder that the workers have turned resolutely towards thought and action resting mainly on the morality and truth of the Machine?⁸⁹

Many figures associated with Constructivism contributed to the Proletkul't Theatre—Lunacharsky, Alexei Gan, Meyerhold, Nathan Altmann, Alexander Rodchenko, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Sergei Eisenstein were all involved. If Carter was unaware of the internecine tensions in Proletkul't—Lunacharsky had been attacked as a high-art liberal and many of the theoretical debates were felt irrelevant by the contributing workers—he nonetheless provided a sophisticated account of the movement, observing that its strength lay in its adaptability (the early plays concerned War and Revolution, the post-Revolutionary plays dealt with the machine and construction) and its mix of professional and non-professional playwrights, directors, and stagehands.

In short, Carter's text was a thorough and insightful analysis of Soviet theatre, which equated the machine aesthetic with Constructivism and proletarian culture. These complex variations were only briefly addressed at the February 1926 International Theatre Exposition, held at Steinway Hall in New York. Apart from two short pieces by

⁸⁸ James C. McClelland, 'Utopianism versus Revolutionary Heroism in Bolshevik Policy: The Proletarian Culture Debate', *Slavic Review*, September 1980, p. 413.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p. 85.

S. Margoline and S. Ignatov on the Kamerny Theatre there was little explanation of the Russian exhibits. Margoline provided a pithy survey of trends in Russian theatre, explaining rival positions between ‘the Left’, represented by Meyerhold, Proletkul’t, and the Theatre of the Revolution, versus ‘the Right’ or ‘academic’ theatre, which included most other theatres, chiefly the Moscow Art Theatre and the Kamerny Theatre. Whilst maintaining the pretence of objectivity throughout the article, Margoline’s concluding words on the significance of Meyerhold’s system of Bio-Mechanics revealed his allegiance. Margoline’s essay was balanced by Ignatoff’s polemic on the Kamerny Theatre, which claimed that Tairov’s direction was ‘revolutionary’. Such distinctions were obscured in the vastness of the exhibition itself. If the complexities and politics of Soviet Constructivist theatre were elided then that was a consequence of the curators’ commitment to International Constructivism.

Kiesler originally mounted the show at the Konzerrthaus in Vienna in 1924 as the Internationale Ausstellung neuer Theatertechnik (International Exhibition of New Theatre Techniques). The American exhibition was co-organized with Heap, co-editor of *The Little Review*, under the auspices of the Theatre Guild, the Provincetown Playhouse, the Greenwich Village Theatre, and the Neighbourhood Playhouse. It took two floors of Steinway Hall to house this enormous collection of 1,500 theatre set designs, costumes, and props from seventeen countries, the show featured work by over 100 exhibitors, including Fernand Léger, Pablo Picasso, László Moholy-Nagy, Exter and Alexander Rodchenko. An American section was appended in New York, and was not part of the original conception of the exhibition. The Russian and American sections were the largest (forty-four and thirty-nine exhibitors respectively). The Russian section included all of the key Soviet theatre—as well as Rodchenko and Exter, there was work by Liubov Popova, the Stenberg Brothers, Isaac Rabinovitch, Altmann, Nikolai Erdman, Varvara Stepanova, Vasily Federovsky, Alexander Vesnin, and Pavel Tchelitcheff. Only the more experimental theatre companies were represented: the Meyerhold Theatre, the Theatre of the Revolution, and the Theatre Beresil from Kiev. As well as the Russian section, the exhibition featured some important figures of the Central and Eastern European avant-garde, such as Oscar Schlemmer from Germany, the Czech Josef

Capek, Szymon Syrkus from Poland, Theo van Doesburg from Holland, and Moholy-Nagy, a Hungarian.

Whereas the European section represented a full survey of avant-garde (mostly Constructivist) theatre art, the American section consisted of more generally modernist work, with exhibits by the most successful designers in New York, chiefly Simonson, Jones, Norman Bel-Geddes, Jo Mielziner, Donald Oenslager, and Throckmorton. There were also some examples of recent forays into Constructivism by American designers. Simonson and Gorelik's designs for Capek's *R.U.R.* and Lawson's *Processional* respectively were tentative explorations of industrial iconography. However, there was bolder work by Louis Lozowick, whose settings for *Gas* were derived from Popova's *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, and Boris Aronson, who had trained with Exter at the Kamerny Theatre (both are discussed below).

The exhibition was a watershed moment for Constructivism in America. It prompted the unlikely scenario of features on Constructivism in the mainstream press.⁹⁰ As in Vienna, Kiesler mounted the exhibits with his Constructivist 'L and T' system (see Chapter One). His *Space Stage* (Fig. 54), a spiralling edifice which echoed Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument for the Third International* and Popova's *The Magnanimous Cuckold* construction, had been the centrepiece of the Vienna exhibition, but for practical reasons was represented here by plans and models—Kiesler had arrived in New York in January 1926, carrying with him the bulk of the Vienna exhibition, in around 70 cases. Kiesler and Heap had actually met in Paris in 1925 at the *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Modernes Industriels*, where Kiesler's work 'represented, along

⁹⁰ Given the traditional resistance of the press in New York to experimentation in art, the reviews of the show were surprisingly enthusiastic. From these reviews and notices, it is evident that Kiesler held numerous press conferences, and succeeded in stirring much press interest in the exhibition. Kiesler's invariably controversial pronouncements on the 'actorless theatre' and the 'fourth dimensional theatre', and the novelty of Constructivism captured the imaginations of American newspaper reporters, who gave the show much coverage. See also 'Constructivism Big Thing at Exposition', *New York Tribune*, 28 February 1926. 'Constructivism in Apogee: Russian Shakespeare in Plane and Shape', *Brooklyn Evening Transcript*, 13 March 1926, 'A Stage in Fourth Dimension', *Brooklyn Eagle*, 16 March 1926, 'Audience are Actors in Newest Theatre', *New York Evening Post*, 15 March 1926, and 'MOVING TO THROW OUT THE ACTOR AND TO SUBSTITUTE LIGHTS, COLORS, AND SMELLS' *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 10 March 1926.

with Le Corbusier, who built *L'Esprit Nouveau*, the French pavilion, and Konstantin Melnikov, who built the Soviet one, the most recent trends in European architecture'.⁹¹ Heap had been sufficiently impressed by Kiesler's *City in Space* exhibit, a suspended architectonic construction, to postpone plans for her mooted Machine-Age Exposition. On Kiesler's arrival in New York, the pair produced an extensive catalogue for the International Theatre Exposition, which was published as the Winter 1926 edition of *The Little Review*. The catalogue featured twenty-three articles by an international selection of playwrights, artists, and commentators, over seventy illustrations and photographic reproductions of plays, costumes, set designs, and film stills—from Yakov Protazanov's *Aelita*, Hans Richter's *Steigen-Fallen*, and Viking Eggeling's *Vertical-Horizontal*.

The catalogue essays that most directly engaged with Constructivism were those by Kiesler and Lozowick. Indeed, Kiesler's foreword was presented as a manifesto on theatrical Constructivism: 'THE THEATRE IS DEAD...WE ARE WORKING FOR THE THEATRE THAT HAS SURVIVED THE THEATRE...WE ARE WORKING FOR THE SOUND BODY OF A NEW SOCIETY'.⁹² These statements were developed in his extended catalogue essay, which was entitled 'Debacle of the Modern Theatre'. Here Kiesler explained the *Space Stage*, writing that 'the theatre of illusion and illustration is ended...the contemporary theatre calls for the vitality of life itself, a vitality which has the force and tempo of the age'.⁹³ Therefore an 'open stage', in which performances would be defined spatially by 'tridimensionality' and motion, would secure 'the systematic cooperation of man and object'.⁹⁴ Performances could be viewed from any part of the theatre equally well, and with no backdrop the spiralling ramp and ladders of the 'Space Stage' allowed action on different levels. This 'circus-like' aspect had strong similarities with Popova's stage sets at Meyerhold's theatre. Kiesler imagined performances of machine age 'space-plays'. If the content of the 'space play'

⁹¹ Dieter Bogner, 'Kiesler and the European Avant-Garde', in L. Phillips, ed., *Frederick Kiesler*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, New York and W. W. Norton and Company, p. 54.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Kiesler, 'Debacle of the Modern Theatre', *International Theatre Exposition, The Little Review*, Winter 1926, p. 67.

⁹⁴ *ibid*, p. 72.

was unspecified, then a possible indicator of the stage sets on the *Space Stage* was the electro-mechanical construction that Kiesler designed for the production of *R.U.R.* (Fig. 55), Karel Capek's ironic futuristic satire about a robot rebellion, at the Theater am Kurfürstendamm in Berlin in 1923.⁹⁵

In '*Gas: A Theatrical Experiment*', Lozowick considered that Kaiser's play, which he had designed for the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, 'deals with a situation which is more intense in America than anywhere else in the world.'⁹⁶ For Lozowick, the American context, as the hub of industrial modernity, had necessitated the forms of the stage set. In this sense *Gas* was a paradigm production, which returned the technological fervour of Amerikanismus and Amerikanizm to America, akin to 'The Americanization of Art', his essay for the Machine-Age Exposition. He found Kaiser's plays to be especially appropriate for the contemporary American theatre for their focus on heavy industry, and wrote that:

the settings were to be the crystallization of a vision fashioned by the rigid geometric pattern of the American city; the verticals of its smoke stacks, the parallels of its car tracks, the squares of its streets, the cubes of its factories, the arcs of its bridges, the cylinders of its gas tanks.⁹⁷

With its dynamic machine aesthetic and multi-level sets, made of ladders, platforms, high-tension wires, cranes, and giant cogs, *Gas* (Fig. 56) was the first major production that was conceived in direct relation to Soviet Constructivism. Indeed the theatre critic Kenneth Macgowan cited *Gas* as the 'first true example of Constructivism in America'.⁹⁸ Directed by Marion Gering, a Russian émigré and former student of Meyerhold, *Gas* had previously been produced in Russia, at the Bolshoi Dramatic Theatre in Petrograd in 1922, with sets by Yuri Annenkov (Fig. 57). It is unclear whether either Gering or Lozowick had seen this production, or even photographs of it,

⁹⁵ Kiesler also designed O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* in 1924 at the Lustspieltheater, Berlin.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Kenneth Macgowan, 'Stagecraft Shows Its Newest Heresies: International Theatrical Exposition to Display Models of Constructivist and Cubist Scenery From Europe', *The New York Times Magazine*, 14 February 1926, p. 23.

but the resemblance between the two sets is notable, although, as Marquardt points out, Lozowick's designs were clearly modelled on Popova's *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (Fig. 58).⁹⁹ The similarities between the Russian and American productions were dictated by the play, a hallucinatory tale of exploding factories and workers' unrest, which called for a technological, yet abstract environment. The machine imagery reflected Kaiser's addled fascination with technology—evident in a rousing plea to the striking workers orated by 'the Engineer':

Your labours create marvels of steel. Power pulses in machines of your driving gas!
—You propel the speed of trains that thunder your triumph over bridges you rivet!
—You launch leviathan liners into the sea...Quivering towers you build shear into the whistling wind that threatens the aerials the ether-waves speak into! You raise engines from the ground which howl with rage in the sky at the annihilation of their weight flying along in the clouds!¹⁰⁰

If the sinister Engineer in Kaiser's *Gas* was distinct from the exalted 'Engineer' of Constructivist discourse, then Lozowick's sets, like the Russian production, tended more towards machine adulation than machine anxiety.

In his catalogue essay, Lozowick also referred to Constructivism by emphasizing the importance of 'the audience as an active force', which 'is commonly neglected in the theatre, although, while a theatre is possible without decorations, texts or even actors an audience is its most consistent factor. And the theatre which draws on contemporary sources is most likely to possess potentially the widest audience'.¹⁰¹ Lozowick wrote that the play had a 'social cause and aesthetic effect', and that 'the materialistic and mechanistic tendencies which have transformed the face of the earth and the habits of man, finally affected some artists also, who then proceeded to attempt an aesthetic interpretation of this transformation'.¹⁰² Yet a passing reference to the 'elemental emotion, collective action, class conflict, standardization of commodities, specialization

⁹⁹ Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, 'Louis Lozowick: From "Machine Ornaments" to Applied Design', *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, Spring 1988, p. 44.

¹⁰⁰ Georg Kaiser, *Gas I*, 1918, reprinted in *Five Plays*, trans. B. J. Kenworthy, Rex Last, and J. M. Ritchie, London: Calder and Boyars, 1971, p. 232. The shorter *Gas II* dated from 1920. The American production was probably an amalgamation of the two plays.

¹⁰¹ Lozowick, 'Gas: A Theatrical Experiment', *International Theatre Exposition*, p. 60.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, p. 58.

of occupations' in Kaiser's play revealed that Lozowick, who by 1926 was becoming increasingly involved in radical politics, recognized potentially negative conditions within industrial societies.¹⁰³ Despite the sources of his stage designs and some of his ideas, Lozowick's ambivalence towards Constructivism, outlined in Chapter One, meant that he adapted formal elements, as with his *Machine Ornaments*, without entirely embracing the rubric. His assertion of the specificity of the American scene for this American interpretation of a German play also diminished the importance of the Soviet situation.

Nevertheless, Lozowick was one of the most prolific commentators on Soviet culture in the 1920s. His coverage of the theatre was printed in the *Menorah Journal*, *Theatre Arts Monthly*, *Theatre Guild Magazine*, *Hound and Horn*, and *Theatre 1929*, a pamphlet produced by the NPT.¹⁰⁴ In these articles, Lozowick was equal in his admiration of the careers of Tairov and Meyerhold, although his comments on Constructivism at the turn of the 1930s tended to see the movement as chiefly a consequence of the economic needs of the early 1920s.¹⁰⁵ His deepest sympathies lay with the Jewish theatre, which was 'unequivocally opposed to what is known as an "Agit" (propaganda) play, and insists on accomplished artistry in everything it undertakes, convinced that the spirit of revolution resides in, and is served by, the manner as much as the material'.¹⁰⁶ Subsequent to *Gas*, Lozowick lectured at and contributed graphic work to the Workers' Drama League and the NPT, but did not design stage sets for the group. Despite writing on Russian Jewish theatres, he played no discernable part in the American Yiddish theatre, which catered for a predominantly

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ 'Russia's Jewish Theatres', *Theatre Arts Monthly*, June 1927; 'The Moscow Jewish State Theatre', *Menorah Journal*, May 1928; 'Alexandra Exter's Marionettes', *Theatre Arts Monthly*, July 1928; 'The Theatre is for the Actor: An Iconoclast's Methods in Moscow', *Theatre Guild Magazine*, October 1929; 'Theatre Chronicle: V. E. Meyerhold and His Theatre', *Hound and Horn*, October-December 1930.

¹⁰⁵ Louis Lozowick, 'Theatre Chronicle: V. E. Meyerhold and His Theatre', *Hound and Horn*, October-December 1930, p. 97; L. Lozowick and J. Freeman, 'The Soviet Theatre', in Lozowick, Kunitz, and Freeman, *Voices of October: Art and Literature in Soviet Russia*, New York: Vanguard Press, 1930, p. 197.

¹⁰⁶ Louis Lozowick, 'Russia's Jewish Theatres', *Theatre Arts Monthly*, June 1927, p. 422.

Russian-Jewish émigré audience, although he may have been familiar with Boris Aronson's Constructivist stage sets for productions of Yiddish language plays.

In February 1926 *Theatre Arts Monthly* ran a short piece on Aronson's designs with the caption:

"Constructivism" has seemed to be a sort of monopoly of the revolutionary Russian theatre; and it is therefore something of a surprise to learn that in New York City...a little experimental theatre, Unser [Our] Theatre, has been mounting plays in the most modernistic fashion.¹⁰⁷

Having studied under Exter at Tairov's theatre in Moscow, Aronson travelled to Berlin in 1922 where his paintings were shown at the landmark van Diemen Gallery exhibition of Russian art. He later remembered that he was 'under the influence of Tatlin and Lissitzky and Ehrenberg, it was a whole movement in Berlin where we all lived together'.¹⁰⁸ He arrived in New York in 1923, recalling that 'the fascination of America lay in the concept of a new world—a technical civilization [where] the mechanical inventions represented romantic fantasy'.¹⁰⁹ In 1931 Shepard Traube wrote that Aronson 'saw in contemporary Russia none of the physical realization of what was represented in the theatre', but 'dreamed of New York as a vast and distant city of skyscrapers jammed together and soaring heavenward in an ecstasy of line, a complete actual reproduction of what impressed him in the representative theatre'.¹¹⁰ He imagined stage sets with 'signs of neon nights' that might incorporate these technological marvels. The limited resources of the impoverished Unser and Schildkraut theatres compromised these dreams.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, on a tiny budget Aronson produced sets such as the 1925 production of David Pinski's *The Final Balance* (Fig. 59) at Unser Theatre with a geometric, industrial quality and multi-level platforms, redolent of Constructivist

¹⁰⁷ 'Sketches and Scenes from Unser Theater', *Theatre Arts Monthly*, February 1926, p. 131.

¹⁰⁸ Garson Kanin, 'Interview with Boris Aronson', Video recording, 1975, New York Public Library for Performing Arts, Theatre and Film and Tape Archive.

¹⁰⁹ Boris Aronson, quoted in Frank Rich, *The Theatre Art of Boris Aronson*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987, p. 13.

¹¹⁰ Shepard Traube, 'Boris Aronson', *Theatre Guild Magazine*, January 1931, p. 26.

¹¹¹ Garson Kanin, 'Interview with Boris Aronson', op. cit.

designs by Altmann, Exter, and Popova.¹¹² Lee Simonson wrote that ‘his work remains as characteristically Russian as though it had been done for any one of a dozen Soviet playhouses, an exact counterpart in method and manner of Moscow’s experiments’.¹¹³ However, as Aronson relayed in a 1975 interview, the plays of the Yiddish Theatre were mystical in subject and ‘most of the plays took place in Hell or Heaven’.¹¹⁴ Even Ossip Dymov’s *The Bronx Express* of 1925, set on a subway train, involved lengthy dream sequences to the extent that a *New York Sun* critic wrote of ‘a Symbolism so patent to even a Bronx audience that no stagehand was required to come out and explain that the next three acts were only a dream’.¹¹⁵ Moreover, on being hired by the Yiddish Art Theatre, Aronson was told by director Maurice Schwartz to soften the angularity of his designs for *The Tenth Commandment* by growing moss on the corners.¹¹⁶ This particular frenzy of music, dancing, and melodrama involved 360 costumes and twenty-five scene changes. As Frank Rich points out, Aronson’s sets varied from geometric Constructivism, to atmospheric Symbolism, corresponding with the shifting moods of the play.¹¹⁷ Whilst symbolically evoking the hardships of immigrant life, such as in *The Tenth Commandment* where Hell was imagined as a sweatshop inside a grotesque giant human head, these productions witnessed the detachment of Constructivism from its original propagandist use in the Soviet Union and its re-emergence as a strategy for providing popular entertainment.

Such theatres offered an important cultural forum for an impoverished immigrant community, but the formation of ARTEF—Arbeter Teater Ferbund, or Yiddish Theatre Union—witnessed the emergence of a more politically combative Yiddish theatrical project. Founded in 1925, ARTEF participated in the 1928 *Mass Play and Ballet of the Russian Revolution*, a mass event staged by several communist groups at Madison

¹¹² The Schildkraut Theatre gave him \$350 for costumes, set and fee, a task involving several months work, whilst the Unser Theatre was never able to guarantee payment at all. Ibid.

¹¹³ Lee Simonson, ‘Russian Theory in the American Theater’, *The Nation*, 12 June 1929, p. 718.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ella Barnett, ‘Art and the Yiddish Theatre’, *New York Sun*, 20 November 1926, cited in Rich, *The Theatre Art of Boris Aronson*, p. 36.

¹¹⁶ Rich, *ibid.*, p. 38.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p. 41.

Square Gardens to an audience of 20,000, and produced proletarian agit-plays, such as company director Jacob Mestel's *Strike* (also in 1928).¹¹⁸ Aronson, who usually avoided organized politics, nonetheless provided sets for the ARTEF productions *Lag Boymer* and *Jim Kooperkop*, both in 1930.

Aside from Lozowick and Aronson's settings, other machine aesthetic productions that alluded to Constructivism included the sets for *1927* and *Skyscrapers*. *1927* (Fig. 60) was a vehicle for the dancer Tamiris, a former protégé of Martha Graham, who danced to George Gershwin's music at the Little Theatre in January 1928 in front of an angular abstraction of a skyscraper and an elevated train, not unlike a Precisionist city painting.¹¹⁹ Whilst the designer's name has not been recorded, J. B. Neumann, founder of the New Art Circle gallery and champion of Precisionist art, sponsored the show. *Skyscrapers* (Fig. 61), a thirty-minute ballet which was co-written by Robert Edmund Jones and John Alden Carpenter with sets designed by Jones, was performed at the Metropolitan Opera in February 1926. It was a dynamic interpretation of New York life over five acts, with settings featuring geometric abstractions of skyscrapers, subways and Coney Island. In one act the dancers mimicked the actions of those building the skyscrapers—'the movements are those of the constructors, riveters, ironworkers, and engineers'.¹²⁰ The juxtaposition of 'Play' and 'Work' witnessed periods of joyous dance interrupted by 'black-looming labour shadows' indicated by 'a stiff and relentless procession of workmen, lock-stepping to their JOB'.¹²¹ *1927* and *Skyscrapers* were machine age revues that alternately revelled in and reviled

¹¹⁸ Edna Nahshon, *Yiddish Proletarian Theatre: The Art and Politics of the ARTEF, 1925-1940*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998, p.43-4. According to A. B. Magil, ARTEF did not produce plays until 1928, spending the years from 1925-8 studying theatre techniques. A. B. Magil, 'ARTEF Theatre Opens', *New Masses*, December 1931, p. 26; See also Samuel Kreiter, 'The ARTEF', *New Theatre*, November 1934.

¹¹⁹ Helen Tamiris was later a member of the Group Theatre and a founder of the Federal Theatre Project, overseeing the introduction of dance into the organization, Franklin Rosemont 'Modern Dance' entry, in Mary Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas, *Encyclopaedia of the American Left*, London: St James Press, 1990, p. 479.

¹²⁰ 'Robert Edmund Jones: Skyscrapers', *Theatre Arts Monthly*, March 1926, Volume X, Number 3, p. 148.

¹²¹ '“Skyscrapers”: A Ballet of Modern American Life', *Orchestral Score and Synopsis*, New York: Metropolitan Opera House, February 1926, non-paginated.

technological modernity, and superficially invoked a formal Constructivism, referring to the wonders and horrors of the machine, outside of a political discourse.

Concurrently, leftist American artists were imagining a revolutionary machine aesthetic, more consonant with Soviet Constructivism. As we have seen, Lozowick's increased involvement in Communist cultural projects found him working with the Workers' Drama League (hereafter WDL). His confreres in the WDL, which was founded in 1925, included Gold, Lawson, Dos Passos, Farragoh, and Basshe—the founders of the NPT—although, as Ira Levine points out, this appears to have been its sole legacy, as both the theatre and Left wing press ignored its productions.¹²² Ben Blake recorded, in 1935, that the premise of the group was that 'workers' drama...should concern itself with the lives and problems of the workers themselves, their hardships, their strikes, their aspirations'.¹²³ They produced the German proletarian playwright Kurt Wittfogel's *The Biggest Boob in the World*, translated by Upton Sinclair and directed by Gold. In an article in *The Nation*, Gold wrote that the WDL suffered from policy and personality clashes, as well as a lack of clarity concerning conceptual direction and 'the immaturity of the new artistic direction'.¹²⁴ They disbanded in 1928, long after Gold et al had abandoned the group.

Blake noted that the WDL had been considerably inspired by Carter's *New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia*, which opened up a 'dazzling new vista for the future of the arts under the banner of labor'.¹²⁵ There was also some firsthand experience to draw from. In 1925, Gold travelled to the Soviet Union and detailed his impressions on the Soviet theatre in *The Nation*. Enthused by the vibrant experimentation of the new theatre, Gold pilloried Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre as a 'dead' institution, an obsolete museum of bourgeois art. Russia was now the 'world laboratory in the arts and sciences', and its protagonist was Meyerhold. Gold wrote how:

All that was static in the old theatre has been stamped out. This is the theatre of dynamics; the moving picture is its avowed model. Drawing-room plays have no place

¹²² Levine, *Left-Wing Dramatic Theory*, p.66.

¹²³ Ibid, p. 11.

¹²⁴ Blake, *The Awakening of the American Theatre*, p. 10.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

here. This theatre is the battle-field of life; it is a trench, a factory, the deck of a ship in a storm. And the young workers and soldiers adore their futurist director, Meyerhold.¹²⁶

Shorn of all theatrical tradition, the stage in Meyerhold's theatre was like a 'steel mill or factory'.¹²⁷ This reflected the celebration of the machine:

machinery has been made a character in the drama. City rhythms, the blare of Modernism, the iron shouts of industrialism, there are the actors...and Futurism is the fantastic godmother of this swarm of new theatres in Russia; Futurism, the cult of a few odd persons in New York.¹²⁸

The latter 'odd persons' were undoubtedly Gold and his cohorts at the nascent WDL and *New Masses*, although by 'Futurism' Gold clearly meant 'Constructivism'. Above all, Meyerhold's theatre was 'popular' as 'the mob wants the best in art', whereas 'the individualist clings to the old and shoddy'.¹²⁹

In September 1926, *The Daily Worker* printed Gold's 'Young Proletaire, A Fable', an experimental short story set in 'New America' about a militant worker with 'hands like machines'.¹³⁰ At one point Young Proletaire proclaims the virtues of the machine to a group of ageing bohemians who have fled to a cave from New America:

the Machines give us leisure. They are our slaves now. And they give us creative joy. Yes, we have the joy of the Machines. They are truth in action. Their swift lines are the new sculpture. Their rhythms are in new man's music. Precision; mathematics; world law. Have destroyed bunk. In art and science, have killed rhetoric, metaphysics...Machines move like the planets, with grand and awful precision. And we are the gods who set them moving. They have given us a thousand fingers, eyes, ears and senses...Machines are the death of child-magic. But are the birth of man-magic. Machines are the will of man...Machines make man social. An individual cannot create a dynamo...Machines are thought expressed as steel. We love them heroically, as men once loved the Thunder-God.¹³¹

¹²⁶ Michael Gold, 'Theater and Revolution', *The Nation*, 11 November 1925, p. 537.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid, p. 536.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Michael Gold, 'Young Proletaire: A Fable', *Daily Worker*, 18 September 1926, p.6.

¹³¹ Ibid, p.7

These fervent, mythic pronouncements were redolent of ‘Towards Proletarian Art’, Gold’s Nietzschean polemic of 1921, yet the machine adulation was derived from Constructivism, witnessing a translation of the Soviet Constructivist theories into an (albeit fictional) American setting.¹³² Gold denounced the escapist bourgeois world of art, and located an emergent and vital counter-movement amidst the proletariat—‘millions of better artists were being born among the workers each year... Young Proletaire did not lack for art’.¹³³

In March 1927 Gold announced the arrival of the NPT in *New Masses*. He quickly asserted Meyerhold’s importance—‘Constructivism is his invention; it is a technique for capturing the swift powerful movement of the Machine Age’.¹³⁴ If Constructivism alone had ‘digested’ modern life, then many American writers and artists were ‘in full flight from the machine age’.¹³⁵ After all, ‘in semi-peasant Moscow, they have boldly converted type-writers, radios, jazz, skyscrapers, revolution and machinery into art. But in machine-age America writers still yearn bucolically like Keats’.¹³⁶ In November 1927 Gold dubbed the NPT ‘A *New Masses* Theatre’, which was ‘packed with humour, melodrama, poetry, pathos, heroism, jazz, choral recitation, dancing, grotesquery, and the new free technique of the stage which has been so greatly proven by Meyerhold and the other futurists’.¹³⁷ For Gold, the NPT was the most important theatrical development since the Provincetown Players. Indeed, the name referred both to the earlier group’s Playwrights Theatre and their close relationship with *The Masses*, hence the appellation ‘A *New Masses* Theatre’.¹³⁸ Thus Gold paid homage

¹³² Michael Gold, ‘Towards Proletarian Art’, *Liberator*, February 1921, reprinted in M. Folsom, ed., *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology*, New York: International Publishers, 1972, p. 62.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Michael Gold, ‘Loud Speaker and Other Essays’, *New Masses*, March 1927, p. 6.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Michael Gold, ‘A *New Masses* Theatre’, *New Masses*, November 1927, p. 23.

¹³⁸ Following the demise of *The Masses* in 1917 and its successor *The Liberator* in 1924, *New Masses*, which was initially to be called *Dynamo*, was founded to ‘interpret the activities of workers, farmers, strikers etc...in such a way as to bring out the general human and cultural significance of particular movements’. ‘Prospectus for Dynamo’, March 1925, cited in Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt ‘*New Masses* and John Reed Club

to those antecedents, but also asserted the NPT as a new generation, and the *New Masses* as a more formally and politically radical journal. Although not (yet) bound by party line, *New Masses* was nonetheless imbued, as Gold put it, with the 'revolt of the workers of the world'.¹³⁹ A *New Masses* theatre was thus needed to interpret a world of 'Fascism, jazz, the victory of the machine, radio, money, Broadway and the hard boiled verities of industrialism'.¹⁴⁰

In the *Daily Worker*, Basshe also imagined the NPT as a machine age theatre: there is a union of dictatorship today: the Mass and the Machine. They go hand in hand. The rhythm is one...the proletarian theatre is the first to make use of this "character"...it will ask such artists as Louis Lozowick to bring his dreams of engines, of sewing machines, of tenement houses upon the stage...it will order from Bill Gropper his collection of mad mankind...it will insist that the playwright forget the impotent middle class, and devote his talents to the portrayal of the brothers and sisters of the machine.¹⁴¹

He counselled that a symbiotic relationship with a worker audience would 'mould our policy, direct our efforts, signalize its disapproval', so that ultimately 'they can claim us as their own, as we sincerely hope our theatre can claim them'.¹⁴²

Ironically it was funding from a millionaire, the 'Maecenas of Manhattan' Otto Kahn, which enabled the founding of the NPT in early 1927.¹⁴³ The first plays were staged at the Fifty-second Street Theatre, before the NPT found a permanent, cheaper home at the old Cherry Lane Playhouse on Commerce Street in Greenwich Village in

Artists, 1926-1936: Evolution of Ideology, Subject Matter, and Style', *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, Vol. 12, Spring 1989, p. 58.

¹³⁹ Gold, 'A *New Masses* Theatre', p. 23.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Em Jo Basshe, 'Theatre, Mass, and Machine', *Daily Worker*, March 19 1927, p. 8.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Kahn was a German-born banker who arrived in America in 1893, to become one of the country's richest men and a famous patron, hence the reference to the Roman patron Maecenas. According to Knox and Stahl, his sympathy with radical causes may have stemmed from his father's involvement in the revolution in 1848 in Germany. From the evidence of Kahn's papers, Knox and Stahl record that throughout 1927 Kahn lent the NPT \$53,600. Very little of this money was repaid and Kahn withdrew support. George A. Knox and Herbert M. Stahl, *Dos Passos and "The Revolting Playwrights"*, New York: Upsala University, 1964, pp. 62 and 85. Ben Blake claimed that the total endowment from Kahn was \$100,000. Blake, *The Awakening of the American Theatre*, p. 11.

December 1927.¹⁴⁴ Unlike the WDL, the NPT would produce only contemporary American plays. A manifesto was penned, declaring that: ‘We aim to serve the new author. We are in search of creative material... We advocate no “Ism”, but are not afraid of experimentation, and we pledge to the avoidance of dullness and Aestheticism’.¹⁴⁵ The establishment of the group was celebrated as a timely political intervention in the American theatre:

the New Playwrights Theatre will be a clearing house for ideas and a focus for social protest. It is the *only* theatre that can fulfil such a function. Most American artists consider themselves too important and aloof to be interested in the great currents of history that carry them along like straws. We must keep up this double work of innovation in method and ideas. There must be one playhouse which maintains a contact with those social forces which are the driving power of our times.¹⁴⁶

The December 1927 edition of *New Masses* printed a piece by Dos Passos, entitled ‘Towards a Revolutionary Theatre’, which stated that the NPT would fulfil the need for a specifically American activist theatre. He explained that:

by American I don’t mean that the group’s interests must necessarily be limited to America, but that they should be as deeply rooted here as possible. By revolutionary I mean that such a theatre must break with the present day theatrical tradition, not with the general traditions of the theatre, and it must draw its life and ideas from the conscious sections of the industrial and white collar working classes which are out to get control of the great flabby mass of capitalist society and mould it to their own purpose.¹⁴⁷

A revolutionary theatre needed to be conceived on a grand scale if it were to compete with the ‘vast milliondollar ineptitudes of the billiondollar movies, and with the crafty skill in flattering the public of the smart real estate men who run Broadway’.¹⁴⁸ Dos Passos conceded, however, that the present theatre on Commerce Street—with only 240 uncomfortable seats, many in disrepair, and a ‘gloomy’ auditorium—was undeniably

¹⁴⁴ ‘New Playwrights Theatre Find New Home in Greenwich Village’, *Daily Worker*, 26 August 1927, p. 4.

¹⁴⁵ Manifesto brochure, cited in Knox and Stahl, *Dos Passos*, p. 67.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ John Dos Passos, ‘Towards a Revolutionary Theatre’, *New Masses*, December 1927, p. 20.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

inadequate. Yet ‘economy’ was advantageous in countering the ‘hokum’ of Broadway and the art theatre—indeed, the solution was not an increased budget, which might corrupt the project, but ‘less money’.¹⁴⁹

Dos Passos railed against the ‘rotting egos’ of those dilettantes who ‘used the arts as a mushy refuge from themselves’, arguing that ‘in a world building out of polished steel and glass all this padded brocade round the necks of sniffing geniuses is hokum and death to any sincere work’.¹⁵⁰ This sentiment echoed Basshe’s ‘The Revolt on Fifty-second Street’, a *New York Times* article of February 1927, which had heralded the opening of the NPT. Basshe asserted that:

the contemporary spirit of the theatre—along with other artists—does not hide himself in a corner, hoping against hope for the return of the glories, colour, and pageant of the past. He stands shoulder to shoulder with the mentors of this our age: the Einsteins, Goethals, Curies, Michelsons, Edisons...He accepts their nuts, bolts, cranes; he listens to the tune played by their acetylene torches, cutting through steel, rock, bone; he trembles when their snoring engines shriek and pound away.¹⁵¹

Basshe imagined a theatre ‘where the spirit, the movement, the music of the age is carried on, accentuated, amplified, crystallized’.¹⁵² It would feature a specifically American theatricalization of the machine age, a heady brew of ‘flapper emotion’, ‘screeching advertisements’ and ‘Candy Kid’s escapades’, where ‘we may listen to the engineer of a three-ton truck playing obligato to a chorus of Negroes singing the unforgettable spirituals’.¹⁵³ This theatre would not seek to lull or pamper the audience, but serve as a forceful jolt. This aim was consonant with Dos Passos’s invocation of an ‘active, working audience’ in ‘Towards a Revolutionary Theatre’.¹⁵⁴

These sentiments were also analogous to Brecht’s embryonic ‘Epic Theatre’, where he argued that ‘instead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grips with things’—whilst retaining emotion, the play appealed to the ‘spectator’s reason’

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Em Jo Basshe ‘The Revolt on Fifty-Second Street’, *New York Times*, 27 February 1927, VIII, p. 2.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Dos Passos, ‘Towards a Revolutionary Theatre’, p. 20.

rather than feelings.¹⁵⁵ Brecht sought to transform the audience from entranced receivers into participating activists through shocks, quotations, and the negation of illusionism. Yet Brecht was barely known in America, and any familiarity with his ideas stemmed from these authors' knowledge of Piscator's theatre, which Blake referred to as one of the touchstones of the WDL.¹⁵⁶ Although lesser known in the USA than Meyerhold, the Piscator-Bühne (founded in 1927) had one area of intersection with the NPT—in April 1928 the Lessing-Theater staged Upton Sinclair's *Singing Jailbirds*, which was subsequently produced by the NPT in January 1929. The German production was a critical and commercial disaster and was abandoned after fourteen shows, contributing to the demise of Piscator's theatre. As we shall see, parallels between the concurrent failure of the NPT and the Piscator-Bühne were drawn in *New Masses* in 1929.

In its brief existence, the NPT produced nine plays—all by members of the group, with the exception of Upton Sinclair's *Singing Jailbirds* and Paul Sifton's *The Belt*.¹⁵⁷ I will focus on those plays that were most engaged with the machine aesthetic and Soviet Constructivism—*Loud Speaker* and *The International* by Lawson, Sifton's *The Belt*, and Dos Passos's *Airways Inc.* These plays featured technological subject matter combined with Constructivist set designs and revolutionary politics. Their various artistic merits are discussed here only in relation to critical responses—their importance is historical and cultural rather than literary.

¹⁵⁵ Bertolt Brecht, 'The Epic Theatre and its Difficulties', *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 27 November 1927, reprinted in John Willet, ed. and trans., *Brecht on Theatre*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1957, p. 23.

¹⁵⁶ Blake, *The Awakening of the American Theatre*, p. 10. Piscator was the pioneer of proletarian theatre in Germany, first at the Proletarisches Theater and from 1924 at the Volksbühne, both in Berlin. From experiments in Expressionism, Piscator developed a sophisticated proletarian theatre that married Constructivist set design, photographic backdrops, and integrated film into a range of stage productions, from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to Maxim Gorky's *Lower Depths*. See Erwin Piscator, *The Political Theatre*, 1929, trans. Hugh Rorrison, London: Eyre Methuen, 1980, p. 304.

¹⁵⁷ The entire repertoire: John Howard Lawson, *Loud Speaker* (March 1927), Em Jo Basshe, *Earth* (February 1927), Francis Farragoh, *Pinwheel* (February-March 1927, a Neighbourhood Playhouse production), Paul Sifton, *The Belt* (October 1927), Basshe *The Centuries* (November 1927), Lawson, *The International* (January 1928), Mike Gold, *Hoboken Blues* (February 1928), Upton Sinclair, *Singing Jailbirds* (January 1929), John Dos Passos, *Airways Inc* (February 1929), Gold, *Fiesta* (September 1929, a Provincetown Playhouse production).

Lawson's *Loud Speaker* was the first play produced, opening at the Fifty-Second Street Theatre on 2 March 1927 and running for forty-two performances. Gorelik's Constructivist stage setting (Fig. 62 and Fig. 63) followed the stage directions, which called for:

a constructed stage, assembled in a simple arrangement of a number of platforms and stairs, with articles of furniture suggesting the usage of the scene. The whole setting is permanent throughout. There are two practical slides, one right front beside the high platform, with landing place near centre of stage, and one left shooting off the stage.¹⁵⁸

The action of the play took place on these various levels. *Loud Speaker* was set in the mansion of a State Governor on the eve of an election, and each of the levels corresponded with a floor of the house. The steps and platforms were decorated with home furnishings typical of an affluent American home, such as a chaise longue. As with *Processional*, jazz was intrinsic to the play and the stage directions stipulated that 'on a high platform right, a little separated from the rest but in full view of the audience, a negro jazz orchestra sits throughout the performance, playing when the occasion demands it'.¹⁵⁹ Lawson envisaged a musical production performed with the physical dynamism of Meyerhold's theatre, and 'the set thus forms a complete circuit up, down and about the stage, capable of considerable variation in lighting, and purposely destined to allow a maximum of movement and farce action'.¹⁶⁰ Emulating Constructivist theatre, there was no curtain or proscenium.

The play itself was a riot of music, politics and farce. The somewhat clumsy integration of jazz was epitomized by a scene, at the close of Act I, when 'six negro politicians of exaggerated type', a delegation from Harlem, 'break into a wild jazz rhythm, laughing as they dance', with only tenuous relevance to the already convoluted narrative.¹⁶¹ The story follows Harry U. Collins, a disillusioned gubernatorial candidate selling himself as 'a plain business man, running for Governor on a businessman ticket, one hundred percent for law and order and Americanism', and his family as they await

¹⁵⁸ John Howard Lawson, *Loud Speaker*. New York: The Macaulay Company, 1927, p. 15.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 16.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, pp. 74-6.

the results of an election. Technology was therefore integral to the action, and a radio, telephones, and press cameras enhanced the machine aesthetic stage set. The action of the play was frantic, with various intruders to the house periodically bursting onto the stage, instigating slapstick chases all over the construction. The farce was intended to expose the farce of politics, especially evident in Collins's dramatic victory. For during a moment of drunken sincerity, Collins almost scuppers his electoral chances by railing against the cynicism of his political position on a radio broadcast, uttering that 'the Government is blah, you folks are fed on pap that wouldn't deceive an infant in diapers'.¹⁶² Yet Collins amazingly wins his the hearts of the voters with the following proclamation:

I'm a man standing here with truth coming out of my mouth instead of drool, but for the first time in my life I'm a *man*! I've done a lot of crooked things and I've enjoyed them, I'm too good to be a governor, I get more satisfaction out of telling the American public to go to hell.¹⁶³

On election, he is immediately forced to abandon his newfound altruism by signing some unspecified draconian order. As well as satirizing the political system, Lawson identified the politician as not just trapped in a political machine which he cannot control, but also as a machine himself. At one point, Collins' neglected wife accuses him: 'you're getting to be more of a machine every day'.¹⁶⁴

Yet all the characters of the play were essentially mechanistic. In the introduction to the published play, Joseph Wood Krutch argued that '*Loud Speaker* is probably the first American play to take complete advantage of the fact that certain characters like the flapper and the politician have reached the point where they may be successfully used as puppets'.¹⁶⁵ He argued that Lawson's play was no mere novelty but an Americanized Commedia dell'Arte, 'by way of Moscow rather than Venice'.¹⁶⁶ Like

¹⁶² Ibid, p. 139

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 33.

¹⁶⁵ Joseph Wood Krutch, 'Introduction', *ibid*, p xii.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, p. x.

Processional, the play departed from Expressionism, as it was ‘not intended to be profound or particularly significant of any esoteric thing’.¹⁶⁷

Other critics were less generous. Gilbert Seldes hammered Lawson’s ‘commonplace and tedious’ attack on American life.¹⁶⁸ Worse still, the play was ‘dull’.¹⁶⁹ He found that ‘the constructed scenery, which is extremely interesting to the eye...slows up an action that is already far too slow’.¹⁷⁰ Finding the play itself ‘tiresome’, J. Brooks Atkinson applauded the set, noting that ‘no half-way measures temper the scenic design: it is Constructivist to the last daub of red paint’.¹⁷¹ There were, however, questions concerning the relevance of Constructivism. In *New Masses*, Bernard Smith felt that:

Loud Speaker was dictated by a desire to write a play for a Constructivist stage, but that *Loud Speaker* itself does not dictate Constructivism. In effect, the permanent, constructed set, supposed to facilitate freedom of movement, becomes a distraction. Here is an example of a technique grafted onto a play.¹⁷²

John Anderson celebrated Gorelik’s design, but likewise wondered its relevance for the play:

a structural monster, a wild and wayward contraption, sprawling platforms and steps up and down the stage in opulent satire of itself. It is brilliantly effective, but except for what kidding it comes in for from the play, has about as much place in the show as it has in *Abie’s Irish Rose*.¹⁷³

When *The International*, Lawson’s subsequent opus, opened in January 1928, it did little to assuage his critics. This musical comedy was convoluted and incoherent even by Lawson’s standards, and was less a narrative than a series of improbable

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, p. xi.

¹⁶⁸ Gilbert Seldes, ‘The Theatre’, *The Dial*, May 1927, p. 436.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 437.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ J. Brooks Atkinson, ‘The Play’, *New York Times*, 3 March 1927, p. 27.

¹⁷² Bernard Smith, ‘Machines and Mobs’, *New Masses*, March 1928, p. 23.

¹⁷³ John Anderson, ‘Loud Speaker’, *New York Evening Post*, 4 March 1927, p. 8. *Abie’s Irish Rose*, a comedy by Anne Nichols, was a hugely successful show that ran for five and a half years until late 1927.

scenarios that ranged wildly across the globe from Wall Street to Tibet to Moscow to a desert in China and back to New York. The action was inspired by events on the international stage during 1927, specifically the shelling of the Chinese city of Nanjing by American gunboats, and concerned imperialism and the competition for oil. A note in the *Daily Worker* relayed that Chinese, Hindu, Japanese, Filipino, and many other workers, as well as the Nicaraguan leader General Sandino's brother (American marines were currently engaged in operations in Nicaragua) and the All-America Anti-Imperialist League had been invited to a performance of the play.¹⁷⁴ It was also an imaginary account of the international spread of the revolution and its partial manifestation in America. The characters were effectively types—an idealistic middle class American, a hard-nosed Russian, an absurd British General, an Italian fascist, an American negro prostitute, etc—and the dialogue was a sequence of slogans on imperialism and its discontents, indicating a further departure from Naturalism. Whilst the music featured motifs from 'The International' and 'The Birth of the Blues', the musical directions called for more experimentation than *Loud Speaker*. Lawson stipulated a 'musical score along modernistic lines with special emphasis on broken rhythms, machine noises and chanting blues'.¹⁷⁵ There were two choruses, of eight women apiece, dressed as stenographers and communists. The actors gambolled around a 'a series of blocks building up like a futurist impression of mass', a construction designed by Dos Passos to resemble 'a futurist city, a mountain pile or a rough relief map'.¹⁷⁶ The Constructivist stage set added to the machine aesthetic evident in lines such as 'the revolution will walk like a tractor across the earth' and 'The International is shaping men with the precision of a great machine. The International is shaping a steel dream!', and complemented by publicity materials that featured a *Machine Ornament* of a crane by Lozowick (Fig. 64).¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ 'Anti-Imperialists to See "International"', *Daily Worker*, 25 January 1928, p. 3.

¹⁷⁵ John Howard Lawson, *The International*, New York: The Macaulay Company, 1928, p. 7.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 8.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 83 and p. 88.

Yet, as Jonathan L. Chambers points out, despite all this technological optimism, lively music and jokes, *The International* is pessimistic in tone.¹⁷⁸ The revolution begins with a cannon shot fired accidentally by a Russian agent provocateur in Tibet. The outcome is not, however, the triumphant accession of power by the masses but war between communists and fascists, and the bleak vision of the dying protagonist, banker's son David Fitch, beseeching Alise, the female lead, to 'plant a [red] flag here' in New York, in the hope of a sustained revolution. The play ends seconds later with the violent, pointless death of another character, the proletarian Tim. The Soviet commissar Rubeloff is depicted as cruel and domineering, refusing Alise, an Italian revolutionary living in Russia, papers to travel to 'the country of the Ford and the skyscraper'.¹⁷⁹ This characterization drew criticism from Sender Garlin in the *Daily Worker*, who found Rubeloff 'unconvincing'.¹⁸⁰ Garlin also complained of the lack of workers in *The International*, and found that the treatment of the 'world struggle for oil' evaded 'all the social and economic implications' to dwell on people 'obsessed with romantic conceptions of world revolution'.¹⁸¹ In short, it seemed completely divorced from any *actual* political struggle.

Critics from the mainstream press also reacted angrily to Lawson's inchoate political message, yet focused more on its shortcomings as a work of drama and entertainment. Alexander Woollcott termed it a 'musical comedy with the laughter, unpretentiousness, most of the music and all of the lightheartedness left out'.¹⁸² Stephen Rathbun declared it a 'dud', partly because 'revolutions do not scale down to the small

¹⁷⁸ Jonathan L. Chambers, *Messiah of the New Technique: John Howard Lawson, Communism, and American Theatre, 1923-1937*, Southern Illinois University Press, 2006, p. 113.

¹⁷⁹ Lawson, *The International*, p. 69.

¹⁸⁰ Sender Garlin, 'Lawson Play an Ingenuous Drama of Revolution', *Daily Worker*, 16 Jan 1928, p. 4. A heated response from Dos Passos the following week on Garlin's lack of engagement with the technique of Lawson's play was greeted with further criticisms from Garlin. "Novelist Hits Review", *Daily Worker*, 20 January 1928, p. 4, and 'Replies to Dos Passos on *International*', 21 January 1928, p. 6.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Alexander Woollcott, 'The Stage', *New York World*, 16 January 1928, p. 17.

stages to be found in the theatres of Greenwich Village'.¹⁸³ Robert Littell was simultaneously overwhelmed and underwhelmed: 'it is economical and political and geographical and cultural and ethnic and philosophical and sociological and local and cosmic and ironic and expressionistic and constructivistic and class-conscious and race-conscious and self-conscious and fantastically tiresome'.¹⁸⁴ A *New York Times* critic also noted 'a vague background of Expressionism, a constructivistic stage setting, and jazz interludes' which combined were 'experimental...even if Mr Lawson does not seem to be quite sure where he is going'.¹⁸⁵

In contrast, Sifton's *The Belt* (Fig. 65) was a more focused investigation of a specific American situation, and arguably integrated Constructivism more effectively than Lawson's work. Whereas *Loud Speaker* and *The International* used Constructivism with arbitrary reference to the action, the automated mechanical belt in Sifton's play, created by Remo Bufano, was the centrepiece of the narrative and the theme, functioning both literally and metaphorically. The story concerns autoworker Jim Thompson, beaten down by ten years of unrelenting toil on the assembly line. On the tenth anniversary of his job, he is awarded a visit from the 'Old Man', the paternalistic boss of the plant who is modelled on Henry Ford. The 'Old Man' arrives with reporters and a movie camera team, and ceremoniously rewards Jim with a medal, whilst brushing aside Jim's complaints over losing his position as foreman because the Boston branch has beaten his plant. Whilst Jim's wife, Flora, is dazzled by the occasion, his daughter's boyfriend, agitator and former belt worker Bill Vance, is scathing about so scant a reward for such gruelling, dehumanizing work. Vance's discontent burns through the community, and the belt workers at the plant erupt in a full-scale revolt of machine wrecking (Fig. 66), which is quickly crushed by the police.

The belt itself casts a constant pall over the characters lives. Jim's will to live is eroded, and the neglected Flora, is embroiled in flippant love affairs and futile dreams of material prosperity. In the production, walls of their house were gradually removed to

¹⁸³ Stephen Rathbun, 'The International has Premiere', *New York Sun*, 10 January 1928, p. 15.

¹⁸⁴ Robert Littell, 'The International Arrives', *New York Evening Post*, 16 January 1928, p. 18.

¹⁸⁵ 'The International Full of Realism', *The New York Times*, 16 January 1928, p. 24.

reveal Bufano's automated belt, with workers on the night shift grimly bantering through their work amidst the noise of the factory. The play was staged at the new NPT theatre on Commerce Street, with additional settings by Dos Passos that stood against bare brickwork with no curtain or proscenium. The stage notes called for the workers to 'work monotonously, putting on parts, hammering, pushing drills'.¹⁸⁶ As the action of the play intensifies the noise of the factory increases but as the revolt escalates jazz is introduced and the workers break into dance, rhythmically chanting 'we ain't gonna work no more'.¹⁸⁷

The belt is a dehumanizing force that turns men into machines. Jim cries out in desperation to his wife 'I'm not going to be a god-damn machine all my life'.¹⁸⁸ He informs the Old Man how his son Ralph, on medical leave from the plant, 'broke down' like a malfunctioning machine.¹⁸⁹ The most vehement critique of the belt comes from Vance, who mocks the lure of 'eight hours, car, jazz, hooch, women'.¹⁹⁰ He rages that the belt workers are 'just damn machines', especially Jim whose years of loyalty and endurance have made him 'the Iron Man'.¹⁹¹ Citing the workers' exhausted apathy, Bill claims that 'it's The Belt that makes them get this way'.¹⁹² He describes the belt—'the God-damned everlasting BELT!'—as omnipotent and oppressive:

twenty-four hours it keeps moving, more cars, more wheels, more doors, more radiators, more transmissions, more piston rings, more batteries, more paint, more men knocked out in the testing room or hit on the head on pay-day by one of the guys from the penitentiary.¹⁹³

Not only does the belt enslave and dehumanize the worker it also renders him passive, sapping his vitality and draining his libido. Similarly, the workers' sexual lives have become mechanized. One of Bill's tirades concerns this issue: 'You don't know how to

¹⁸⁶ Paul Sifton *The Belt*, New York: The Macaulay Company, 1927, p. 67.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 178.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 18.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p. 36.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 62.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 72.

¹⁹² *Ibid*, p. 131.

¹⁹³ *Ibid*, p. 73.

handle a woman. She ain't a machine. You can't turn a switch and start her loving you and turn it off when you please. She's a human being. She figured she married a man and when he turns into a machine she raises hell'.¹⁹⁴

Sifton's investigation of the factory's control over workers' entire lives, and especially their sexual relations, was analogous to Antonio Gramsci's essay on 'Americanism and Fordism'. Gramsci wrote that a 'new type of man is demanded by the rationalization of production and work cannot be developed until the sexual instinct has been suitably regulated and until it too has been rationalized'.¹⁹⁵ With specific reference to the machinations of the Ford Company in enjoining temperance from both alcohol and promiscuity, Gramsci argued that although this behaviour stemmed from the private sector, it could become the ideology of the state, and was a significant component of 'Americanism'. Yet Gramsci's complex espousal of Americanism was devised in opposition to Fascism in Italy, and therefore whilst 'it might seem that...the sexual function has been mechanized...in reality we are dealing with the growth of a new form of sexual union shorn of the bright and dazzling colour of the romantic tinsel typical of the petit bourgeois and the Bohemian layabout'.¹⁹⁶ However, the assembly line did not destroy the worker's mind or spirit, but allowed for a 'complete state of freedom', which was controlled by the industrialists' ideological strategies of extensive educational programmes:

they have understood that a "trained gorilla" is just a phrase, that "unfortunately" the worker remains a man and even that during his work he thinks more...and not only does the worker think, but the fact that he gets no immediate satisfaction from his work and realises that they are trying to reduce him to a trained gorilla, can lead him to a train of thought that is far from conformist.¹⁹⁷

In *The Belt*, Bill Vance's refusal to conform is predicated on this factor. He mocks the workers on the belt as 'just a lot of goddam mules', as little more than beasts of

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 131.

¹⁹⁵ A. Gramsci, 'Americanism and Fordism', 1930, in *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, eds. and trans., New York: International Publishers, 1971, p. 297.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 304.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 310.

burden.¹⁹⁸ He rails against the strictures of ‘no booze, no parties, get married, stay home, save your money—and keep working!’¹⁹⁹ Therefore the accompaniment of jazz and dancing to the revolt was crucial in the workers’ resistance to the enfolding restraints of the belt.

Critical responses were mixed, with some finding the polemic too crude and the production too clumsy. Yet some pertinent issues were raised. Frank Vreeland wrote that Sifton ‘has doubtless read his George Kaiser thoroughly’ in penning this ‘raucous yelp at Henry Ford & Co’.²⁰⁰ J. Brooks Atkinson also observed the Expressionist tenor of Sifton’s play which was ‘of the revolutionary colour that flamed abroad in the works of Toller a few years ago’.²⁰¹ He bemoaned the new NPT venue, where ‘the seats...pitch forward violently [and] unless the theatregoer clings to the arms of his chair he is likely to be catapulted to the stage at any moment’.²⁰² Percy Hammond found the play ‘feeble’ and joked that ‘if Mr Ford is not oversensitive his feelings need not be hurt by [this] earnest caricature...the product of a little posse of rebels who are out pop-gunning for things as they are, both on and off the stage’.²⁰³

Some more favourable reviews came from the leftist press. Nathaniel Buchwald, the drama critic for the Yiddish *Freiheit* and lynchpin of ARTEF, wrote in the *Daily Worker* that it was a ‘strong, vital, proletarian play’, which heralded a vibrant proletarian theatre.²⁰⁴ Yet he observed that proletarians would find the anti-machine sentiments of the play problematic. T. J. O’Flaherty also addressed this point in the *Daily Worker*, arguing that machine-wrecking belonged to ‘the old days when the workers were foolish enough to believe that the machine was the cause of their economic trouble, that it was industrial inefficiency instead of the private ownership of the productive machine [that]

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 62.

¹⁹⁹ Sifton, *The Belt*, p.128.

²⁰⁰ Frank Vreeland, ‘Hitting the Auto Industry in *The Belt*’, *New York Telegram*, 20 October 1927, p. 12.

²⁰¹ J. Brooks Atkinson, ‘Troubles in the Crank Case’, *New York Times*, 20 October 1927, p. 33.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Percy Hammond, ‘The Theatres’, *New York Herald Tribune*, 20 October 1927, p. 16.

²⁰⁴ Nathaniel Buchwald, ‘A Vital Proletarian Drama’, trans. Sender Garlin, *Daily Worker*, 31 October 1927, p. 6.

did them out of their jobs'.²⁰⁵ Furthermore, the proletarian family were too tentative, tired out, and obedient to the factory's moral strictures to be exemplary or believable. O'Flaherty's criticism of the resistance to the auto industry in *The Belt* was pertinent. He found that the 'strike-leader is a futile individual' without attachment to a broader movement of political resistance, whose presence added nothing to the play and possibly besmirched real-life communist agitation in the auto industry.²⁰⁶ Roger Keeran writes that 'in the 1920s communists in auto were the main voices on behalf of industrial unionism and class struggle'.²⁰⁷ However, Sifton's play obscured the divisions between the Communist Party and socialist union leaders in the auto industry. In 1926, as Keeran relays, the Auto Workers Union was riven by a dispute over the Communist Party's Trade Union Committee's stipulation that 'all members of the party who are eligible to join the unions in the Auto industry shall be distributed proportionally with a view to capture machinery of both the Auto workers and machinists Locals in the various automobile centers'.²⁰⁸ This move was blocked by socialists who changed regulations of the union to restrict office to those with more than one year's membership.²⁰⁹ Yet despite these quarrels the communists and socialists alike sought greater, ultimately total, control over the industry—the aim was to commandeer rather than destroy the machine.

These reviews struck upon the central paradox of *The Belt*. Despite the fanfares of machine adulation in the NPT's manifestos to the press and the much praised mechanized Constructivist stage set, Sifton's play found the machine to be a horrible enslaving device, a symptom of the devaluation of humanity in technological modernity. Thus the invocations of Kaiser and Toller were trenchant—behind the Constructivism there lingered a residual Expressionist horror of technology. As stated, this was also the paradox of the machine aesthetic in Soviet theatre. Indeed, the *Daily Worker* reported in 1928 that, according to William Gropper, Meyerhold was planning to stage *The Belt* and

²⁰⁵ T. J. O'Flaherty, 'A Labor Play', *Daily Worker*, 24 October 1927, p. 4.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Roger Keeran, *The Communist Party and the Auto Workers Unions*, Indiana University Press, 1980, p. 13.

²⁰⁸ Cited in *ibid*, p. 46.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

Lawson's *Processional*, although these productions were never realized.²¹⁰ *The Belt* exposed the core problematic of the machine aesthetic for the American Left. If for the ideologues of Amerikanizm in Russia, the machine was venerated as the means for realizing Socialism and for Gramsci was a means of revolutionizing the 'Old World', in the ultramodern capitalist society of the 'New World' it merely indicated the form of exploitation by one class of another. Yet the objections of the *Daily Worker* critics to *The Belt* were based on the principle that the machine was the deserved inheritance of the proletariat, and Socialism would cleanse the machine of class divisions. It was hoped that such a process was underway in the Soviet Union. However, not everyone on the Left was certain, such as E. A. in *New Masses*: 'Right now Russia is installing modern industrial plants of her own. Are the horrible things that *The Belt* does to minds and bodies of workers inevitable? Or is there a difference between high pressure production in Socialist Russia and in Henry Ford's Detroit?'²¹¹

Dos Passos's *Airways Inc*, which opened in February 1929 at the Grove Street Theatre, also witnessed ambivalence towards technological modernity, coupled with an experimental machine aesthetic. The sets for this play were not technically Constructivist, as there was no mechanical or geometric construction, as in *Loud Speaker* and *The Belt*. Yet neither were they naturalistic. For example, a living room was simply implied by two short panels at a right angle with sparse furnishings against the bare brick of the theatre wall, like a set in a television studio (Fig. 67). Unlike Lawson's work, vaudeville and jazz were muted, and the reverence of the machine was tempered in a diatribe against the inequalities of machine-age America. Yet, featuring a suicide, a strike, a plane crash, and an electrocution, *Airways Inc* maintained the eventful, frenetic action that characterized NPT productions.

Airways, Inc was a departure from Dos Passos's earlier play *The Moon is a Gong*, produced in 1926 at the Cherry Lane Playhouse, which had been a jazz extravaganza in the vein of Lawson's *Processional*, albeit a less critically successful one

²¹⁰ 'Meyerhold's Theatre to Produce *The Belt* and *Processional*', *Daily Worker*, 13 January 1928, p. 4.

²¹¹ E. A., 'The Belt', *New Masses*, November 1927, p. 3.

that even Lawson found wanting.²¹² However, Lawson's recommendation that Dos Passos should leap across 'the horrible gap between the art theatre and the people's theatre, between a planned design and the red stuff of entertainment' was not heeded by a further investment in the troubled genre of political jazz farce, but in a more concentrated and complex political and psychological analysis of an American family.²¹³

Set in a dilapidated American suburb, the play follows the fortunes of a disintegrating middle-class family during a strike at the local mill. The Turner family's house is situated between a building site and a wreck, reflecting the twin evils of speculation and poverty addressed in the play. *Airways Inc* is combative from the outset—the opening lines are spoken by a real estate man to his colleague: 'This, sir, is the model city of the future. You can see behind these streets of low-priced, artistic onefamily houses the sterner buildings of the Hartshorn Mills, the Swastika Refrigerator Company, the Universal Electric Plant'.²¹⁴ The first act is dominated by erstwhile engineer Cyrus 'Dad' Turner, a broken man whose 'Turner's Rotary Alcohol Engine' has been ignored by the aviation industry, and the Professor, a Hungarian émigré and former revolutionary, whose bitter reminiscences accompany the former's dejected monologues. As Dad Turner relives his maltreatment as a young inventor and his failure to get rich, the Professor remembers his betrayal to the authorities by his closest comrade. Edmund Wilson wrote that 'with great ingenuity, Dos Passos had assembled on a single suburban street-corner representatives of most of the classes and groups that go to make up our society'.²¹⁵ Indeed, whilst the youngest son Edison, or Eddy, and his sometime girlfriend Edna represent the amoral, directionless hedonist and cynical flapper respectively, and the eldest son Claude is the careerist managerial clerk whose humanity had been beaten from him in a soulless job, daughter Martha is the moral conscience of the household, thanklessly struggling to hold everything together while

²¹² The play was also known as *The Garbage Man*. Dos Passos' sole other play was *Fortune Heights*, of 1934. John Howard Lawson, 'Wanted—A Showman', *New Masses*, June 1926, p. 20.

²¹³ Lawson, *ibid*.

²¹⁴ John Dos Passos, *Airways Inc*, New York: The Macaulay Company, 1928, p. 10.

²¹⁵ Edmund Wilson, 'John Dos Passos and the Social Revolution', *The New Republic*, 17 April 1929, p. 256.

simultaneously forgoing her desire for a career. Her paramour, a Jewish radical called Walter Goldberg, is the spokesman for the strikers at the mill, and is routinely vilified by Martha's brothers. In contrast, the second son, Elmer, is a record-breaking aviator, a local Lindbergh whose blossoming relationship with greedy investors is about to make him a fortune. Alongside these principal characters are Bootleggers, Strikers, Cops, 'Bulls', 'Dicks', and various menial workers.

The action of the play is complex and hectic. Act I sets up the antagonisms between the characters and their brutalization by 'the interests', terminating with Dad Turner's suicide. Act II takes place eight months later, as the strike is underway and culminates with the disillusioned and drunken Elmer Turner, coerced into dropping leaflets opposing the strike, being shot down in his plane and suffering horrific injuries. Act III focuses on the framing of Walter Goldberg for shooting down the aviator and his subsequent execution (the illegitimacy of the verdict was a reference to the Sacco and Vanzetti case, and the play was inspired by the desperate appeal by the Sacco-Vanzetti defence team in a telegraph to Charles Lindbergh to persuade President Coolidge to halt the execution).²¹⁶ Whereas Elmer ends the play a cripple, whose former 'friends' have deserted him, elder brother Claude has emerged triumphant as an executive for All-American Airways. Claude represents the cold and cruel pragmatism and paternalism of American business. He says to Martha: 'Nothing can hurt us now, especially with the clearing up of the labor unrest. As I see it, we've done a great patriotic duty restoring confidence, in American enterprise and inventions'.²¹⁷ Yet Martha has the final word, with a bleak soliloquy that closes the play, where she laments the misery of her life:

city, where I've lived walled up in old dead fear. America, where I've scurried from store to subway from church to home. World where I've lived without knowing...At what speed of the wind can I fly away, to escape these words that burn and sting, to escape the lack that is in me like a stone.²¹⁸

²¹⁶ 'Airways, Inc. by John Dos Passos, to Have Premiere Tonite', *Daily Worker*, 20 February 1929, p. 4.

²¹⁷ Dos Passos, *Airways Inc.*, p. 146.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-8.

Airways Inc was broadly judged the most sophisticated NPT play. In *The Daily Worker*, A. B. Magil wrote that ‘it has been written, unlike certain other New Playwrights offspring, with intelligence, clarity, and discipline’, and didn’t ‘titillate pseudo-revolutionary sensibilities by irrelevant singing of the International or waving of red flags’.²¹⁹ If the play did not directly address class struggle, then it was ‘a play of personal frustration against the background of the class struggle’.²²⁰ A. G. took a similar line in the *New York Telegram*, writing that ‘the plot is complex, involved and disposed to go off on frequent tangents, but the theme throughout is one of class conflict and clash of social viewpoints’.²²¹ Stephen Rathbun agreed in the *New York Sun*, praising the ‘combination of Realism and Symbolism’, evident in ‘O’Neillesque’ soliloquies, in this apparently propaganda-free ‘satirical study of America’.²²² Even the less favourable reviews, by William G. King in the *New York Post* and Richard Watts Jr in the *New York Herald Tribune* applauded several powerful dramatic moments, and praised the gesture towards Realism.²²³

In a more searching analysis, Wilson considered it to be amongst Dos Passos’s best work, but bemoaned the almost total ‘assassination’ of American middle-class values. He reasoned that whilst the strength of Dos Passos’s work lay in his simultaneous celebration of America as a literary subject and his urgency to expose its sickness, there was a danger in total negation:

when a man as intelligent as Dos Passos...and so good an artist allows his bias so to falsify his picture of life that, in spite of all the accurate observation and all the imaginative insight, its values are partly those of melodrama—we begin to suspect some stubborn sentimentalism at the bottom of the whole thing, some deep buried streak of hysteria of which his misapplied resentments represent the aggressive side.²²⁴

²¹⁹ A. B. Magil, ‘*Airways Inc.* is Best Play Produced by New Playwrights’, *Daily Worker*, 23 February 1929, p. 4.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ A. G., ‘Play by Dos Passos at Grove Street’, *New York Telegram*, 27 February 1929, p. 12.

²²² Stephen Rathbun, ‘*Airways, Inc.*’, *New York Sun*, 21 February 1929, p. 10.

²²³ William G. King, ‘*Airways, Inc.*’, *New York Post*, 21 February 1929, p. 14, Richard Watts Jr., ‘*Airways, Inc.* Given by New Playwrights at the Grove Street’, *New York Herald Tribune*, 21 February 1929, p. 19.

²²⁴ Wilson, ‘John Dos Passos and the Social Revolution’, p. 257.

This rendered his politics ‘suspect’—by protesting too much and too broadly, Dos Passos risked appearing a romantic rebel rather than a radical activist. This was a factor that Malcolm Cowley also divined in his work. In a review of *1919*, the second part of the *USA* trilogy published in 1932, Cowley offered that ‘Dos Passos is in reality two novelists’—the ‘esthete’ and the ‘collectivist’, who collaborated on his books, the latter increasingly superseding the former.²²⁵ Cowley lampooned the Harvard ‘esthete’ with acuity, ridiculing those who live by the philosophy ‘that society is hostile, stupid and unmanageable: it is the world of philistines, from which it is the poet’s duty and privilege to remain aloof’.²²⁶ This typology of the bohemian rebel, an E. E. Cummings or Harry Crosby persona, who transmits aloof individualism through veils of modernist prose, only partly applied to Dos Passos. In *Manhattan Transfer* of 1925, Dos Passos’s focus on ‘the color and movement of a whole city’ came in conflict with his Harvard individualism, and Cowley noted how the story quickly centred on Jimmy Herf, and his complex troubles. This tendency was, however, minimized in the first two instalments of the *USA* trilogy, *The 42nd Parallel* and *1919*, as the scope became too large for an excursion into the agonies of the individual—indeed, Cowley termed *1919* ‘the first American collective novel’.²²⁷ Written in the interim between *Manhattan Transfer* and *The 42nd Parallel*, *Airways, Inc* (which Cowley did not mention) was arguably the first step towards a ‘collective’ work. The protagonist of the play was the family itself and none of the characters remotely fitted the tortured young man type—Walter Goldberg, the main representative of dissent, was a working-class socialist.

Yet *Airways, Inc* also held residues of the earlier ‘esthete’, particularly evident in the ambivalence towards technology. In 1916, a young Dos Passos penned an anti-war protest for *Harvard Monthly*, where he blamed the war on ‘Science and Industrialism’:

²²⁵ Malcolm Cowley ‘John Dos Passos: The Poet and the World’, *The New Republic*. 27 April 1932. pp. 303—5, and September 9 1936, p. 34, reprinted in Andrew Hook, ed., *Dos Passos: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1974, p. 76.

²²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 77.

²²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 80.

has not the world today somehow got itself enslaved by this immense machine, the Industrial system. Millions of men perform labor narrowing and stultifying even under the best conditions, bound in the traces of mechanical industry, without ever a chance of self-expression, except in the hectic pleasures of suffocating life in cities. They grind their lives away on the wheels, producing, producing, producing. And of all the results of this degrading, never-ending labor, how little is really necessary to anyone; how much is actually destructive of the capacity of men for living, for the fathoming of life, for the expression of life.²²⁸

This thread was still evident in his 1923 foreword to Lawson's *Roger Bloomer*. Dos Passos argued that a metropolitan American theatre would soon be created by the 'continuously increasing pressure in the grinding engine of industrial life', but a danger existed that these forces would create cities 'filled with robots instead of men'.²²⁹ Five years later, Dos Passos's Constructivist model of 'a machine age theatre' was, as I suggested earlier, inspired by the promise of technology—or at least the necessity to address it in art—yet his perspective in *Airways, Inc* seemed pessimistic. Given that the play concerns industrial unrest, cynical property speculation, corruption in the nascent aviation industry, the suicide of an inventor, not to mention the plane crash of the aviator, the play was hardly a eulogy for technological modernity. Indeed, it was precisely the gleaming machined surfaces of culture in contemporary America that repelled Dos Passos. In a *New Masses* article of 1928, Dos Passos attacked the 'great wave of Cal Coolidge prosperity, Cal Coolidge meanheartedness and meanmindedness'.²³⁰ The culture of the Coolidge era was 'ritzy art', a glossy yet cheap product that was 'incompatible with growth and experiment'.²³¹

For Dos Passos, the NPT was a 'centre of resistance', and its focus was necessarily Coolidge's America. In 1926, he had written, 'I don't think there should be any more phrases, badges, opinions, banners, imported from Russia or anywhere else. Ever since Columbus, imported systems have been the curse of this continent. Why not

²²⁸ John Dos Passos, 'A Humble Protest', *Harvard Monthly*, June 1916, reprinted in D. Pizer, ed., *John Dos Passos: The Major Nonfictional Prose*, Detroit: Wayne State University, 1988, p. 34.

²²⁹ John Dos Passos 'Foreword' to John Howard Lawson, *Roger Bloomer*, New York: Thomas Seltzer Inc, 1923, pp. v-vi.

²³⁰ John Dos Passos, 'They Want Ritzy Art', *New Masses*, June 1928, p. 8.

²³¹ Ibid.

develop our own brand?’²³² If *Airways, Inc* was considerably less influenced by Soviet theatrical trends than Lawson’s work, this did not reflect antipathy to Russian theatre on Dos Passos’s part. He travelled to Russia in 1928 and reported his favourable impressions on the Soviet theatre in the NPT’s short-lived publication *Theatre 1929* and in *The New Republic* the following year. In the first, he noted how in Russia ‘the individuals that make up the audience are less terrorized by the mass than in America’.²³³ In the latter, he bemoaned the American audience: ‘in New York they want to feel part of the imperial American procession towards more money, more varnish, more ritz, that obsessed all our lives; in Moscow they want to feel part of the victorious march through history of the world proletariat’.²³⁴ In both these articles, he was especially positive about Meyerhold’s theatre. Indeed, as stated *Airways, Inc* remained at some distance from Naturalism and, like all NPT productions, the settings were barely descriptive and forewent the framing of the proscenium. Yet, it is significant that *Airways Inc* witnessed an eschewal of explicitly Constructivist techniques, such as a geometric construction and athletic farce, for a sharp examination of social divisions in the American scene.

Gold had originally questioned the political value of Dos Passos’s call in 1926 for a literary ‘new discovery of America’ by asserting that ‘America today...offers the honest young writer only one choice—Revolt!’²³⁵ By 1929, he judged that Dos Passos had resolved this truculence. In *The Daily Worker*, Gold stated that ‘in *Airways, Inc*, John Dos Passos attacks boldly the major problem of our Age and our America—namely, the class war. This is the play of the American workers awakening to class consciousness’.²³⁶ It marked a definite shift from the earlier work, such as *Manhattan Transfer* where despite electrifying prose passages of ‘keen social rebellion and proletarian consciousness’, Gold judged that ‘the mass effect is that the dilemma of

²³² John Dos Passos, ‘The New Masses I’d Like’, *New Masses*, June 1926, p. 20.

²³³ John Dos Passos, ‘Moscow Theatres’, *Theatre 1929*, Vol. 1, No. 2, January 1929, p. 5.

²³⁴ John Dos Passos, ‘The New Theater in Russia’, *The New Republic*, 16 April 1930, p. 236.

²³⁵ Michael Gold, ‘Let it Be Really New!’, *New Masses*, June 1926, p. 20.

²³⁶ Notice for *Airways, Inc*, in the *Daily Worker*, 20 February 1929, p. 4.

the young idealist in America is insoluble'.²³⁷ Gold was firm in his advice—'Dos Passos must read history, psychology and economics and plunge himself into the labor movement'.²³⁸ The latter clause was curious as months before, in April 1926, Dos Passos had visited the striking textile workers at Passaic and had championed the strike in *New Masses*.²³⁹ Melvin Landsberg argues that the event directly influenced Dos Passos's literary representations of strikes in *Airways, Inc* and *The 42nd Parallel*, and furthermore strike leader Albert Weisbord was the likely model for, respectively, Walter Goldberg and Ben Compton.²⁴⁰ The other political source for *Airways, Inc* was the passionate yet vain campaign to save Sacco and Vanzetti—the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee—with which Dos Passos was considerably involved. In 1927 he penned *Facing the Chair*, an extensive account of the case and his interviews with the defendants, whom he was certain were innocent. The execution of Goldberg in *Airways, Inc*, a convenient disposal by the state of a troublesome radical, reflected the widespread opinion that Sacco and Vanzetti were convicted for their radicalism as part of the Red Scare purges rather than their possible guilt, which appeared to be fabricated. In an open letter to the president of Harvard, a member of the Governor of Massachusetts inquiry committee, he complained of the 'arrest of these men at the time of the anarchist raids and their subsequent slow torture by the spiteful and soulless mechanism of the law'.²⁴¹

If the laws that governed America were mechanical, then the political message given by the Professor in *Airways, Inc* calling comrades to embrace technology seemed bitterly ironic. He proclaims, on the subject of Goldberg's imminent funeral, that:

²³⁷ Michael Gold, 'A Barbaric Poem of New York', *New Masses*, August 1926, p. 25.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ John Dos Passos, '300 N. Y. Agitators Reach Passaic', *New Masses*, June 1926. The strike was one of several instigated by the communist led United Front Textile Committee. It was greeted with brute force by the authorities.

²⁴⁰ Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos's Path to "USA."*, Boulder, Colorado: Associated University Press, 1972, p. 129.

²⁴¹ John Dos Passos, 'An Open Letter to President Lowell', *The Nation*, 24 August 1927, p. 176. Landsberg also suggests Dos Passos based Elmer, the aviator and unwitting enemy of the strike, on Lindbergh as an angry reaction to the press coverage of Lindbergh's May Atlantic flight and the corresponding media neglect of the Sacco-Vanzetti trial. Landsberg, p. 151.

Comrades, from this day we must make ourselves machines, machines of brass and nickel, we must turn our hearts into dynamos, our blood into electric current. Look at my hand...the soft twitching flesh is drying up into steel....We must have no more flesh and blood.

Failure is the law of flesh and blood.

We have invented every conceivable kind of machine; killing machines, fighting machines, feeding machines, swimming machines, flying machines; Man is the last machine we must invent.

The electric current that burned out our comrade's life must burn all softness, all tenderness out of our lives.

We must be steel automatons.²⁴²

This resolute sacrifice of humanity, in the face of the inhumane execution of the strike leader, was the bitter price of human frailty, its necessity highlighting only the desperate nature of the situation. This was somewhat removed from the machine fervour of Constructivism, and Dos Passos's politicized collective drama directed the audience to the core paradox of the machine aesthetic. Where Constructivism as a form in the American theatre failed, political Realism prospered, even at the NPT. After all, the most successful political play of the era of the NPT was *Gods of the Lightning*, Maxwell Anderson and Harold Hickerson's tense 1928 dramatization of the Sacco-Vanzetti affair. Indeed, Gold's admiration for the play was predicated on its fearsome Realism: 'I don't know how to praise *Gods of the Lightning*. It hurt too much. It was too close to reality. It was not a play, but an experience. So skilful was the art of the authors and actors, one never thought of art'.²⁴³

In April 1929, Dos Passos resigned from the NPT, signalling its demise. The others left one by one before the theatre closed down several weeks later. An article in the *New York Times* stated that 'lack of support and various labor factions were given for the dissolution of the group'—critical disapproval, public disinterest, internecine quarrels, Otto Kahn's withdrawal and the subsequent lack of money were responsible.²⁴⁴ In the July issue of *New Masses*, Gold printed Piscator's post-mortem on the Prolet-Bühne, stating in an 'Editorial Note' that it 'might well have been written by one of the

²⁴² John Dos Passos, *Airways, Inc.*, pp. 141-2.

²⁴³ Michael Gold, 'The Sacco-Vanzetti Legend', *New Masses*, December 1928, p. 1.

²⁴⁴ 'New Playwrights Abandon Productions', *New York Times*, 26 April 1929, p. 29.

directors of the New Playwrights'.²⁴⁵ Piscator remembered the formation of the group and how:

it was an odd situation. In the midst of the bourgeoisie, hailed as the fashion of the moment, financed by capital and recognized by the state, was born a theatre whose programme was social revolution. For the first time in the history of the theatre, the vast and complex stage apparatus was to serve for the presentation of a world idea and the fighting will of an oppressed class.²⁴⁶

The Prolet-Bühne never reached its intended audience, and the 16,000 workers who supported the theatre were too few to sustain it. He allowed that 'perhaps we began too noisily and cut off all possibility of political or artistic compromise once we were underway'.²⁴⁷ Learning from mistakes was essential, and Piscator stated that his new theatre project, which would emerge in 1930 as a revived Piscator-Bühne, would be free of 'sensational atmosphere' and residues of the bourgeois theatre, and would be in 'living touch with the masses', because 'a revolutionary theatre without its most living element, the revolutionary public, is a contradiction which has no meaning'.²⁴⁸

The following month Dos Passos cited Piscator's article as exemplary when he asked *New Masses* readers 'Did the New Playwrights Theatre Fail?'. He thought so, because 'authors are largely too preoccupied with their own works to make good producers and secondly because the problems involved were not seen clearly enough in the beginning'.²⁴⁹ He reiterated the need for a revolutionary theatre to justify 'mass action' and the destruction of the specious 'pictureframe stage', yet reviewed the output of the NPT with an unsentimental critical line. In political terms, the NPT had failed to change 'the American mind of all classes and denominations' from 'keeping art or ideas in separate watertight compartments'.²⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Dos Passos hoped its very

²⁴⁵ 'Editorial Note' to Erwin Piscator, 'The Social Theatre', *New Masses*, July 1929, p. 14.

²⁴⁶ Erwin Piscator, *ibid.*

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁹ John Dos Passos, 'Did the New Playwrights Theatre Fail?', *New Masses*, August 1929, p. 13.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

existence would make the plight of the next political theatre easier, for ‘the time for half way measures in ideas or methods has gone, if indeed, it ever was’.²⁵¹

The NPT straddled the Comintern’s ‘Third Period Line’, and because it closed in early 1929 preceded the *New Masses* drive towards proletarian culture.²⁵² The formation of the International Workers’ Dramatic Union in Moscow in December 1929 and its conference in June 1930 marked an intensification of proletarian theatre, although no American delegates attended the latter.²⁵³ As editor of *New Masses* from June 1928, Gold’s editorial line was by 1930 staked on commitment to proletarian art, given credence at the International Union of Revolutionary Writers Conference at Kharkov that year (which he attended, with Harry Alan Potamkin, Joshua Kunitz, A. B. Magil, and Gropper).²⁵⁴ Emerging from the untimely proletarian WDL, the NPT attempted to address a revolutionary audience with avant-garde experimentation in the manner of Meyerhold in Russia and Piscator in Germany. Yet the new proletarianism would abandon such a heady brew for a more direct model, partly because those experiments had failed to achieve an audience in the bourgeois theatre itself and had not reached a ‘proletarian’ audience. In January 1929, Gold appealed to worker writers in a *New Masses* piece entitled ‘Go Left, Young Writers’: ‘The old *Masses* was a more brilliant but a more upper class affair. The *New Masses* is working in a different field. It goes after a kind of flesh and blood reality, however crude, instead of the smooth perfect

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Nikolai Bukharin coined the ‘Third Period’ in 1926 at the Seventh ECCI Plenum to follow the First Period (War, Revolution, Civil War) and the Second Period (New Economic Policy). The Third Period involved a ‘shift to the left’ to complete the transition to socialism, and the appellation of ‘social fascism’ to describe social democratic tendencies that were perceived as an obstacle. Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin*, London: Macmillan Press, 1996, pp. 69-70.

²⁵³ James F. Murphy, *The Proletarian Moment: The Controversy over Leftism in Literature*, University of Illinois Press, 1991, p. 111.

²⁵⁴ Lawrence Schwartz writes that ‘the proletarian Kharkov resolutions were the dominant guidelines for American Communists from 1930 to 1935, including the first American Writers’ Congress’, which was held in 1935. Lawrence H Schwartz, *Marxism and Culture: The CPUSA and Aesthetics in the 1930s*, New York: Authors Choice Press, 1980, p. 41. However, Murphy points out that Kharkov influenced ‘literary politics’ more than aesthetics, and Gold’s proletarianism was essentially homespun. See Murphy, *The Proletarian Moment*, pp. 77-78.

thing that is found in books'.²⁵⁵ Likewise, intellectual sophistication was no longer a necessity—the new writer 'is a Red but has few theories. It is all instinct with him'.²⁵⁶ Gold's celebration of the Realism of *Gods of the Lightning* revealed that he was beginning to think that a jazz chorus singing 'The International' on a Constructivist stage might impede a forceful political statement. His 1930 semi-autobiographical novel *Jews without Money* was a model of proletarian literature—direct, sentimental, accessible, and free of the complexities of bourgeois high culture.

Soon after the Wall Street Crash, a proletarian theatre group emerged in New York with a drastically different approach to the NPT. The German speaking Proletbühne, led by John Bonn, specialized in ad hoc performances at rallies and strikes of mass recitations and plays, even when there was no stage to perform on.²⁵⁷ Favouring the directness stipulated by Piscator, their obvious touchstone, they avoided scenery and costumes that might hinder mobility and cost money and time. Blake found that their plays, usually one-act affairs of fifteen to twenty minutes, 'were crude in plot and characterization and full of revolutionary labor "clichés". Yet they had a hard-hitting directness of statement that would often strike off flaming sparks of emotion in the beholder'.²⁵⁸ Language was apparently no obstacle. Following their play *Tempo*, *Tempo!*, 'a mass recitation that portrayed the enforced speed-up in American industry with its attendant evils, and then contrasting it with the rapid but proud and voluntary tempo of socialized construction in the Soviet Union', the Proletbühne would be greeted with the expression 'Hello, Tempo-Tempo' by admiring workers with no German.²⁵⁹

In 1931, Hallie Flanagan spoke of the birth of an American proletarian theatre, exemplified by ARTEF and the nascent Workers' Laboratory Theatre (and its magazine, *Workers' Theatre*). She wrote 'the theatre being born in America today is a theatre of workers. Its object is to create a national culture by and for the working class of

²⁵⁵ Michael Gold, 'Go Left, Young Writers', *New Masses*, January 1929, p. 3.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 4.

²⁵⁷ Born Hans Bohn, Bonn had travelled to New York in 1928. According to James F. Murphy, the Proletbühne had been founded in 1926 as the dramatic section of a worker's club in Yorkville, Manhattan, although their activities were parochial until Bonn's leadership. Murphy, *The Proletarian Moment*, p. 112.

²⁵⁸ Blake, *The Awakening of the American Theatre*, p.15.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 17.

America. Admittedly a weapon in the class struggle, this theatre is being forged in the factories and the mines'.²⁶⁰ She found Workers' Laboratory Theatre output to be a 'rather childish' amalgamation of 'American vaudeville and Russian Blue Blouse technique', with plays such as *Unemployment*, *Mr. God is Not in*, and *What Price Coal* witnessing a disinterest in stylistic finery with 'a direct, terse, hard hitting phraseology, a machine gun repetition, a sharp, type analysis with no individual characterization, and a climax often ending in mass demonstration'.²⁶¹ Flanagan reproduced a section from *Unemployment*—

'1 WORKER: I am hungry
 2 WORKER: My family is hungry
 3 WORKER: I want to work
 4 WORKER: I want a job
 5 WORKER: Won't somebody give me a job?...
 CAPITALIST: There isn't anyone can have a better yacht than
 I...what's that damn noise out there?
 SERVANT: Master, it is the unemployed complaining'.²⁶²

The Capitalist replies 'Unemployed complaining? What have they got to complain about?'.²⁶³ Blake later wrote that *Unemployment* (or *Unemployed* as he called it) was 'no

²⁶⁰ Hallie Flanagan, 'A Theatre is Born', *Theatre Arts Monthly*, July 1931, p. 908. Flanagan was the author of *Shifting Scenes of the Modern European Theatre* (New York: Coward and McGann, 1928), which was based on her travels to Europe in the mid-1920s. She visited Russia in 1926 and the book contained an important analysis of Soviet theatre. She was director of Vassar Theatre at Poughkeepsie, New York, where she produced the well-received political play *Can You Hear Their Voices?* (1931). In August 1935, she became head of the Federal Theatre Project. See Hallie Flanagan, *Arena: The History of the Federal Theatre Project*, New York: Benjamin Bloom, 1940, and Jane De Hart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics*, Princeton University Press, 1967.

²⁶¹ Ibid, p. 914. Founded 1923, the Blue Blouse groups (there were five) were named after the shirts worn by cast and crew in Meyerhold's *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, and were a versatile touring political cabaret that used music and dance in lively political sketches. See Frantisek Deak, '“Blue Blouse” (1923-1928)', *The Drama Review: TDR*, March 1973, pp. 35-46.

²⁶² Flanagan, 'A Theatre is Born', pp. 913-4.

²⁶³ Flanagan omitted the punch-line, which is quoted here from Blake's book, which also reproduced this scene. Blake, *The Awakening of the American Theatre*, p.19. The epitome of blunt and literal nature of proletarian theatre was V. J. Jerome's *Art is a*

great work of art', but stirred an audience who had 'up to then thought of theatre as something remote and highbrow, something removed from their lives and interests, excepting for musical comedies where, if you were flush, you could go to have a good time and forget your troubles'.²⁶⁴ Flanagan admired the utilitarian aesthetic but also applauded the keenness of the worker groups to learn from 'the only theatre at hand, the theatre of the class they are attacking'.²⁶⁵ She quoted Gold, whom she characterized as a mentor to the group, who had opined that 'a worker will not come to a workers' theatre where the production is poor when he can go to a bourgeois theatre where the production is good'.²⁶⁶

This was the rub of proletarian theatre—standards of success were still measured by the example of the 'bourgeois theatre', and a new theatre had to be defined against the canon. The NPT had followed Soviet Constructivists in jettisoning theatrical conventions, culminating several decades of development within the experimental wing of the bourgeois theatre. Yet their intermediary position between the art theatre and proletarian culture pleased only those already politically and stylistically sympathetic, essentially the small cluster around *New Masses*. The proletarian theatre movement went further and abandoned the theatre altogether, finding an audience amongst the workers but failing to satisfy the cultural appetite of leftist intellectuals. Their example proved, however, that Constructivism itself was as unnecessary as any other convention of experimental theatre, potentially impeding the passage of the direct political message—a message that in the Coolidge era had a limited audience.²⁶⁷

Weapon, published in *Workers Theatre* in June 1931, where a capitalist utters '...ART is a weapon in the fight for my interests'. A worker replies: 'we do not play for your and our entertainment, we play because participation in the class struggle is your and our duty. We show the exploitation of the workers, we show the way out, we show the only way out—organized mass action'. Reprinted in Raphael Samuel, Ewan MacColl, and Stuart Cosgrove, *Theatres of the Left 1880-1935: Workers' Theatre Movements in Britain and America*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985, p. 302 and p. 305.

²⁶⁴ Blake, *The Awakening of the American Theatre*, p. 19.

²⁶⁵ Flanagan, 'A Theatre is Born', p. 910.

²⁶⁶ Michael Gold, quoted in *ibid.*

²⁶⁷ Plays with a more explicitly anti-machine message, such as Sophie Treadwell's 1928 *Machinal*, a powerful feminist drama, and Eugene O'Neill's somewhat dated and ridiculous 1929 *Dynamo*, which both continued the Expressionist ghosts-in-the-machine idiom of Rice's *The Adding Machine*, were more successful.

During the Depression, there was a larger audience for a political theatre. Paul Sifton's second play, co-authored with his wife Claire, was entitled *1931*, and was produced that year by the Group Theatre. Led by Harold Clurman, the Group Theatre ran for ten years and gained critical and commercial success, as well as galvanizing political support, especially with Sidney Kingsley's 1933 *Men in White*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, and Clifford Odets' 1937 *Waiting for Lefty*. Finding the NPT productions 'undisciplined, amateurish, lyrical, frivolous', Clurman developed a taut, realist idiom that combined a paired down theatrical Modernism (Gorelik and Oenslager designed for the Group) with powerful, naturalistic performances.²⁶⁸ Under the direction of Lee Strasberg, the actors prepared with painstaking rehearsals involving improvisation and elaborate psychological exercises based on 'affective memory' to create an emotional engagement with the character. These techniques were derived from Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre, and became known as the Stanislavskian method, or 'method acting'. In short, after the NPT's failed experiments, the Group Theatre developed a modernist Realism that returned Naturalism to the political theatre (Fig. 68).²⁶⁹

A further factor of the Group Theatre's potency was their pronounced group identity, a cohesion that had eluded the NPT. At the Brookfield Center in Connecticut actors, directors, writers, and their families lived together in a vibrant, if not always harmonious, communal existence. The photographers Paul Strand and Ralph Steiner were regular visitors, and Steiner engaged the services of the actors in producing two of his short films, *Café Universal* and *Pie in the Sky*. Steiner's photographs of the Group Theatre at work (Fig. 69) represent a key change in his photography, witnessing the introduction of people into an idiom that was almost exclusively concerned with objects, whether skyscrapers, signs, or machines. In the following chapter, I will discuss

²⁶⁸ Harold Clurman, *The Fervent Years: The Story of the Group Theatre and the Thirties*, London: Dennis Dobson, 1946, p. 19.

²⁶⁹ It should be noted that the influence of Soviet theatre did not vanish altogether. The 'Living Newspapers' of the Federal Theatre Project were derived from the original Russian practice of the 1920s. Flanagan had seen Russian and German Living Newspapers in the mid-1920s and adapted them to an American environment. See Stuart Cosgrove, 'From Shock Troupe to Group Theatre', in Samuel, MacColl, and Cosgrove, p. 278.

photographs by Steiner and his some-time student Walker Evans, shifting from the shiny surfaces of the Coolidge era into the ruins of the Depression.

CHAPTER THREE

New and Old Visions in American Photography: Ralph Steiner, Walker Evans, and Americanism.

America is really changing, though I don't think you'd like it any better. At least, though, none of the cocksure prosperous ones are cocksure now.

Walker Evans to Hanns Skolle, 1933.¹

A juxtaposition of Ralph Steiner's 1922 photograph *Ohio Railroad* (Fig. 70) with László Moholy-Nagy's *7 A.M. (New Year's Morning)* (Fig. 71), of 1930, reveals some striking similarities. It is not known whether Steiner's photograph was amongst his work displayed at the Deutsche Werkbund Film und Foto exhibition, which was held in Stuttgart in 1929 and co-organized by Moholy-Nagy. Nor would such information concerning primacy yield a concrete understanding. The almost parallel positioning of the cyclists and pedestrians in these images is probably just a freak coincidence of street photography. Yet their formal parity, evident in the diagonal lines of pavements and shadows as well as the angular aerial viewpoint, is nonetheless arresting. These analogies must be treated cautiously—the nature of chemical photography presupposes an indexical binding to the referent and the local is ultimately intractable. The immediate contexts of production were as distinct as the theoretical underpinnings of Steiner and Moholy-Nagy's photographs. Moholy-Nagy propounded a 'New Vision' in photography, where the multifarious, energetic experimentation of the engineer photographer would cut through the surface to reveal the dynamism of social relations. Steiner apparently just took photographs, espousing no theoretical position. Whereas Steiner photographed mostly in isolation during the decade where the business of

¹ Walker Evans to Hanns Skolle, 20 April 1933, reprinted in Jeff Rosenheim and Douglas Eklund, eds., *Unclassified: A Walker Evans Anthology: Selections from the Walker Evans Archive*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000, p. 167.

America was business, Moholy-Nagy, alongside his wife and colleague Lucia Moholy, participated in a vibrant avant-garde discourse within the volatile political and economic climate of Weimar Germany. Carol Payne, who has written the best of the handful of studies on Steiner, argues that Moholy-Nagy's experiments belonged to a politicized 'machine aesthetic' wherein technological optimism would advance the realization of Socialism. In contrast, Steiner typified American photographers who 'reflected—and implicitly endorsed—the predominantly capitalist milieu of their nation'.²

Payne's argument is redolent of Abigail Solomon Godeau's 1983 essay 'The Armed Vision Disarmed: Radical Formalism from Weapon to Style'. Solomon Godeau's narrative follows the dissipation of the revolutionary possibilities of avant-garde photography as it travelled west from the Soviet Union (Fig. 72).³ Her account is more nuanced than Payne's as she problematizes Moholy-Nagy's practice. For Solomon Godeau, the reestablishment of the Bauhaus as the School of Design in Chicago in 1939 completed a process of alienation of avant-garde photography from revolutionary politics in which both Moholy-Nagy and the original Dessau Bauhaus had played a pivotal role.⁴ By 1939, the New Vision had completely abandoned the instrumentalism of Soviet Radical Formalism and was now applied merely to commercial purposes. *Film und Foto*, often considered a showcase exhibition for New Vision photography, is presented here as the crucial moment of divergence. At *Film und Foto*, argues Solomon Godeau, photography was 'transfigured'.⁵

More importantly for this study, parallel experiments in photography in the United States, which in the case of Alvin Langdon Cockburn and Paul Strand entirely predate those associated with Radical Formalism, are dismissed with the following conclusion: 'Deriving ultimately from Kantian aesthetics, Anglo-American formalism insisted above

² Carol Payne, 'Interactions of Photography and the Mass Media, 1920-1942: The Early Career of Ralph Steiner', PhD Thesis, Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 1998, p. 136.

³ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'The Armed Vision Disarmed: Radical Formalism from Weapon to Style', in Richard Bolton, ed., *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1990. It was originally published in *Afterimage*, January 1983.

⁴ Ibid, p. 94.

⁵ Ibid, p. 90.

all on the autonomy, purity, and self-reflexivity of the work of art [and] as such it remained throughout its modernist permutations an essentially idealist stance'.⁶

Solomon Godeau reduces American photography in the 1920s to the formula 'Stieglitz, Strand et al'.⁷ In spite of this process of dilution, one contemporary critic wrote that:

the conservative German writers deny emphatically that modern photography was born in Germany. They point out the *Camera Work*, the *Broom*, the photos of Paul Strand, the American commercial photography, as the strongest influences which corrupted German youth and made it depart from the sacred dogma of Pictorialism.⁸

I will contest Solomon Godeau's formulation with reference to photographs by Steiner and his occasional pupil Walker Evans, and argue that whilst both photographers were theoretically disinclined, their work of the late 1920s should be seen as an American counterpart to the New Vision. Those formal analogies with New Vision photography will be considered in the light of the technological variant of 'Amerikanismus' and 'Amerikanizm'—loose, polysemic terms, with fine distinctions in different locales, which referred generally to the cultural and societal impact of American capitalist modernity in Europe and Russia.

Yet as the decade turned, and the American and, subsequently, European economies collapsed, such technological optimism seemed to many to be specious, even culpable. Around 1930 Steiner and Evans appeared tired of the technological imagery and technical gimmickry of New Vision photography. Their focus moved from geometric urban vistas to arcane Americana, yet the work remained essentially modernist. The Americanism of these images was neither sentimental nor nostalgic, but was jaded and bitter, befitting an America now facing an economic depression of unprecedented severity. The question remains, however, whether photography could ever be simply 'disinterested'.

Evans drew significantly from Steiner's photography. Yet the notion of primacy, so clearly advanced in Solomon Godeau's thesis, will be downgraded in this study.

⁶ Ibid, p. 91.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ M. F. Agha 'Paul Outerbridge Jr', *Advertising Arts*, May 1931, reprinted in Manfred Heiting, ed., *Paul Outerbridge, 1896-1958*, Cologne: Taschen, 1999, p. 12.

Rather, I shall argue that at the turn of the decade both photographers concurrently advanced a photographic language that departed from the trickery of the Twenties. If Evans initially borrowed imagery and techniques from Steiner, his work differed in crucial ways. Whilst both photographers sought out uncanny, often humorous, scenes amidst the confusion of city life and the stillness of the small town, Steiner's photographs of the late 1920s and early 1930s were sharp and satirical, based often on absurd juxtapositions, whereas Evans's motifs were isolated by stark cropping. The humour in Evans's work was of a darker shade: it spoke of decay, dissipation and rupture. If Steiner's identity as a photographer was split between commercial work and work conceived as art, then with Evans, whose ambitions prior to taking up photography were mainly literary, the distinction was more pronounced—whilst hostile to commercial work, through poverty he was unable to cast off its manacles. I will first consider the case of Steiner.

Shifting between art and advertising, Steiner's practice during the 1920s exemplified a crisis of identity for photographers. Steiner was trained at the Clarence H. White School, an organization that prepared photographers for the commercial careers. Yet, unique among New York photography educators, White taught photography as both as a fine art and as an applied art—his own background was as an artist photographer.⁹ His emphasis on photography as an art in fact distinguished him, as Steiner later remembered, from all the other photographic schools in New York. White had participated in the Photo-Secession of 1902, the pioneering movement led by Alfred Stieglitz with the expressed aim of securing status as an independent art medium for photography, and his relationship with Stieglitz was complex and fraught, but not oppositional. However, the necessity for such a school indicates at one level a failure by Stieglitz to establish a fully autonomous milieu and market for art photography. This ambition must be examined as a means of understanding decisions later made by Steiner as he constructed his career.

In 'Modern Pictorial Photography', an essay published in *The Century Magazine* in October 1902 to accompany the foundation of the Photo-Secession, Stieglitz celebrated

⁹ Ralph Steiner, *A Point of View*, Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1978, p. 4

photographers ‘using the camera instead of a brush or a pencil as a means of individual artistic expression’.¹⁰ Pictorialism at this stage represented an alternative to the disparate uses of photography as either journalism, in the manner of Jacob Riis, fantastical invention and camera trickery, as in the Melender Brothers’ *The Haunted Lane* of 1880, or mere imitation of genre painting, such as Adolphe Braun’s *Still Life with Deer and Wildfowl* of 1865 (Fig. 73, Fig. 74, and Fig. 75). Stieglitz insisted that photography as an art medium should be defined by the possibilities and limitations of the medium itself.¹¹ The crux was in the distinction of the artist from the professional, and we see here an attempt to anchor photography, to delimit it by the rubric of Art against the illustrative reformism of documentary practices, and to isolate it from and elevate it above the mire of popular and professional photography.

If Stieglitz did not specify the subjects of this new photography—and the images printed in early editions of the Photo-Secession’s *Camera Work* (founded in 1903) and exhibited at the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, ranged from Arcadian nudes to urban scenes—then this was due to the catholic nature of Pictorialism. Although much of Stieglitz’s work was urban in subject, other photographers, such as White and Gertrude Käsebier, composed allegorical and pastoral scenes. Likewise, if Stieglitz increasingly favoured the clarity of focus and contrast characteristic of ‘straight’ photography, then White and Käsebier opted for soft-focus and granular textures. For Stieglitz, the crux of art photography was the photograph as a unique object. Special emphasis was thereby placed on the printing process, and Stieglitz combated the potentially endless reproducibility of photographs by insisting on high quality reproductions—‘hand-pulled’ photogravures printed on Japanese tissue—in *Camera Work*.¹² Stieglitz claimed that:

with the modern methods at command, there are virtually no limitations to the individuality that can be conveyed in the photographic print. These methods are extremely subtle and personal in character. For this reason each individual print has a

¹⁰ Alfred Stieglitz, ‘Modern Pictorial Photography’, *The Century Magazine*, Oct 1902, reprinted in *History of Photography*, Summer 1991, p. 85.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 86.

¹² Paul Roberts, ‘Alfred Stieglitz, 291 Gallery and Camera Work’, in *Alfred Stieglitz: Camera Work, The Complete Illustrations*, Cologne: Taschen, 1997, p. 14.

distinct identity of its production, and, in consequence it rarely happens, in the case of the modern pictorial photograph, that two prints identically alike are produced from the same negative.¹³

The unique print would be an art object, imbued with the aura of the 'spiritual'. Appropriately, Stieglitz imagined himself as a 'seer' or 'prophet', a view that was informed by developments in German art that privileged the spiritual in art.¹⁴ He conceived the Photo-Secession as a forum akin to the European Secession movements, in particular the Munich Secession, which he deemed 'one of the most progressive, liberal, and influential art associations in the world'.¹⁵ From 1908, Stieglitz began exhibiting fine art at 291, the gallery founded in 1905. With advice from Edward Steichen, based in Paris, he began importing work by European modernists, from Picasso to Kandinsky, and reproducing paintings alongside photographs in *Camera Work*. Therefore photography as an art medium presented photography as an analogue to fine art rather than an imitation. Furthermore, like fine art the uniqueness of each print 'has special significance for the collector', enabling the photographer to demand higher prices for prints.¹⁶

As Alan Trachtenberg has argued, Stieglitz's photography witnessed a complex, ultimately anxious engagement with urban life.¹⁷ Although he trained his camera on the subjects of modernity in photographs, such as *The Hand of Man* (1902) and *The City of Ambition* (1910) (Fig. 76 and Fig. 77), industry and the city represented rapid alienating transformations as much as the marvels of technology, indicating fascination and fear in equal measure. Stieglitz's decision to photograph the Flatiron building (Fig. 78) on a snowy, stormy day was later remembered in these terms, 'I suddenly saw the Flatiron building as I had never seen it before. It looked, from where I stood, as if it were moving

¹³ Stieglitz, 'Modern Pictorial Photography', p. 85. Of German Jewish family, Stieglitz experienced the era of German art secessions firsthand, whilst studying mechanical engineering at the Technische Hochschule in Berlin in the early 1880s.

¹⁴ Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935*, University of California Press, 1999, p. 30.

¹⁵ Stieglitz, 'Modern Pictorial Photography', p. 85.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Alan Trachtenberg, 'Image and Ideology: New York in the Photographer's Eye', *Journal of Urban History*, August 1984, p. 459

toward me like the bow of a monster ocean steamer, a picture of the new America which was still in the making'.¹⁸

The sublime American city was also invoked in the work of Paul Strand, Stieglitz's protégé. The figures in *Wall Street* (Fig. 79) of 1915 are dwarfed by the looming window recesses, but are also schematized by the dominant pictorial abstraction. Reproduced in *Camera Work* in October 1916 the photograph was presented as a work of art. Situated between the aestheticism of near-abstraction and the social commentary of the documentary tradition, Strand's work exposed certain tensions within the art photography model. There is an elision therefore in Solomon Godeau's conflation of Stieglitz and Strand's photography, alongside the spurious designation of their work as merely 'formalist'. Strand's photograph *Blind Woman* (Fig. 80) was part of a series of street photographs primarily focused on the urban poor and reproduced in the final issue of *Camera Work* in 1917. It was arguably a residue of Strand's studies with the reformist photographer Lewis Hine at the Ethical Culture School, but also an eloquent though unsettling play on the subject of vision. Strand's *Wall Street* was revisited in *Manhatta*, the film Strand made with Charles Sheeler in 1920. *Manhatta* was a composite of shots of the city and the Hudson River from numerous viewpoints, mostly around lower Manhattan. The city was presented as a sublime wonder, echoed in the captions taken from Walt Whitman's *Songs at Seventy: Mannahatta* of 1888. Stills from the film were published in *Vanity Fair* as 'Cubist Architecture in New York' in January 1921 and 'Manhattan—The Proud and Passionate City' in April 1922 (Fig. 81). These photographs were also used as source material by Sheeler for paintings such as *Church Street El* of 1920 (Fig. 82 and Fig. 83), an abstracted, formalized cityscape distinct from Strand's ominous Wall Street. In this regard, the dual authorship of *Manhatta* was apparent and the film itself was both formal study and urban documentary. Never entirely a documentary or a 'formalist' model, Strand's work was more visceral in content and harsher in execution than Stieglitz's.

¹⁸ Alfred Stieglitz, 'Six Happenings', *Twice a Year*, Nos. 14-15, Fall-Winter 1946-7, pp.188-189, quoted in William Innes Homer, *Alfred Stieglitz and the American Avant-Garde*, New York: Graphic Society, 1977, p. 20.

If there was an unresolved tension between formal and documentary aspects of photography in the aftermath of Pictorialism, then there was also tension between art photography and its commercial applications. It is telling that few photographers were able to fulfil Stieglitz's dream of an independent art photography. His own increasing involvement in the sale of fine art and the demise of *Camera Work* in 1917 testifies to the lack of a sustainable market for art photographers. In contrast, White's school tutored aspirant photographers about the realities of the photographic industry. Tired of factionalism and the dominance of Stieglitz, White's departure, along with that of Gertrude Käsebier and the painter Max Weber, had spelled the demise of the Photo-Secession in 1910. Originally founded as a summer school, the School was by 1914 a fully-fledged organization based on East 11th Street. In 1920 its prospectus advertised photography 'not only as a fine art with an established technique, but also as a practical art, indispensable to modern commerce and industry'.¹⁹ Emphasis was placed on the vocational applications of photography and students were encouraged to pursue careers in various fields, ranging from studio to aerial photography. Thus whilst the painter Max Weber lectured on 'Art Appreciation and Design', White's 'Art and Photography' course covered press and commercial photography.²⁰

Steiner, who enrolled in 1921, later recalled that whilst White favoured Pictorialism in his own photography he 'mostly left us to our own devices except for a weekly and most charitable criticism session'.²¹ Steiner recollected that the school was 'very design-oriented':

we had lots of work in composition, design, and texture. I didn't know what a photographer was supposed to do. I did the designs, and then went out and photographed the world by pulling it into shape so it would fit within a still camera frame and remain a design. Gradually, some interest in material—that is, what was out there in front of my camera—emerged.²²

¹⁹ Cited in Kathleen A. Erwin, '“Photography of the Better Type”: The Teaching of Clarence H. White', in Marianne Fulton, ed., *Pictorialism into Modernism: The Clarence H. White School of Photography*, Rochester, New York: George Eastman House, 1996, p. 152.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Steiner, *A Point of View*, p. 4.

²² Joel Zuker, Interview with Ralph Steiner, *Sightlines*, Fall 1978, p. 31.

In this environment, photographs by students ranged from pastoral studies in the White and Käsebier idiom to abstract works similar to Strand's experiments—Bonnie Yochelson notes that some experiments in abstraction at the School may have even predated those of Strand.²³ Typically, these experiments would involve the abstraction of everyday objects, as in Wynn Richards's *Sugar Cubes and Shadows* (Fig. 84) of 1922 and Steiner's *Typewriter Keys* (Fig. 85) of 1921, and these studies were conceived as potential advertising photographs. Steiner was in 1929 awarded a medal for *Typewriter Keys* at the 8th Annual Exhibition of Advertising Art Selected and Shown by 'The Art Director's Club'.²⁴

Having left the Clarence White School in 1922 without graduating, on White's recommendation Steiner took a job at the Manhattan Photogravure Company, which had once printed *Camera Work*. Steiner's chief responsibility—producing plates for 'honorific banquet menus' and other such mundane tasks—ensured that his tenure was short-lived. By 1923 he had embarked on a career as a professional photographer and, as he later remembered, 'gradually drifted unthinkingly and effortlessly into advertising and magazine work'.²⁵ Steiner's rudderless course throughout the Twenties found him photographing Christmas gifts and 'housekeeping kits' for *The Woman's Home Companion* and *The Delineator* (he was a staff photographer at both magazines), socks for *The New Yorker*, belts for *Vogue*, movie stars for *Vanity Fair*, theatre actors and stage sets for *Theatre Arts Monthly* (Fig. 86).²⁶ This work was plentiful and remunerative, and Steiner slowly established himself as a sought after commercial photographer.²⁷

²³ Bonnie Yochelson, 'Clarence H. White: Peaceful Warrior', in Fulton, *Pictorialism into Modernism*, p. 66.

²⁴ According to Payne, *Typewriter Keys* been used in an advertisement for the Oxford Paper Company. Payne, 'Ralph Steiner', p. 295.

²⁵ Steiner, *A Point of View*, p. 8

²⁶ *Vogue*, July 1928; *The New Yorker*, Vol. 2, No. 43, 1926; *The Delineator*, December 1926; *The Woman's Home Companion*, Vol. LII, No. 2, 1925; 'A portrait of Portia-Peggy Wood'. *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 29, No. 8, April 1928; 'The Coachman', *Theatre Arts Monthly*, October 1932.

²⁷ Steiner, *A Point of View*, p. 8

Perhaps as a consequence of the Clarence White School and his experiences as a jobbing photographer, Steiner's attitude towards photography was decidedly pragmatic and essentially non-theoretical, despite the experimental quality of his work. In a short monographic piece of 1932, M. F. Agha struggled to characterize the diffident and elusive Steiner, whom he compared to the fabled Bavarian soldier whose Curriculum Vitae consisted: 'I was born in 1899 and soon afterwards joined the Army'.²⁸ Steiner explained in *A Point of View*, his 1978 autobiography that he 'was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1899, before the world went wrong'.²⁹ In the book, he played to the audience with anecdotes concerning now famous names of photography, remembering Strand's grim obsessiveness and the 'never-very-happy, usually with-chip-on-shoulder' Walker Evans.³⁰ The book is useful however for gauging Steiner's estimation of Stieglitz, which was particularly unflattering, and his hostility to the self-mythologizing colossus of American Modernism partially explains Steiner's resistance to making large claims for photography. Situating Stieglitz alongside P. T. Barnum, the Wizard of Oz, and Lord Duveen on their 'self-erected pedestals', Steiner termed him 'one of history's greatest salesmen', a self-obsessed ringmaster whose status in chronicles of the period as 'a sage and a source of wisdom is hardly valid'.³¹

However Steiner did not eschew art photography. Alongside advancing himself as a commercial photographer, he simultaneously produced photographs to be consumed as works of art. The imagery in many of them was commercial—advertising billboards, shop signs, and movie posters predominate. The contemporary world is viewed in these images as a sequence of signs, based often on absurd juxtapositions and amusing incongruities. For example, in *Vanderbilt Garage* and *Rival Shoes* (Fig. 87 and Fig. 88) of 1924 banal facets of a city landscape are scrutinized and made strange. The uncanny fostered here is a mild version, far from the viscera of photographs associated with

²⁸ M. F. Agha, 'Ralph Steiner', *Creative Art*, January 1932, p. 35. From 1929 to 1943, Mehmet Agha was the art director for several Condé Nast publications, including *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *House and Garden*. He particularly championed photography and regularly used Edward Steichen, Edward Weston, Cecil Beaton, and Steiner for his magazines.

²⁹ Steiner, *A Point of View*, p. 3.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 28.

³¹ Ibid, p. 7.

Surrealism. Steiner remembered how the arrangement of lights on the Lexington garage tower ‘looked something like a mechanical bug’.³² He also played with scale and repetition. In *Always*, of 1922, (Fig. 89) the chuckling Camel smoker towers over the scuttling hordes like a benign dictator, and the dominant ‘always’ logo marshals the myriad of shop front signs below. The two figures in *Riverside* (Fig. 90) seem dwarfed by the mighty river they contemplate, a towering expanse of water—here Laurel and Hardy have stumbled into the sublime natural vista of a Caspar David Friedrich painting. In *Lollipop* of 1924 (Fig. 91), the repetition of the stage advertisement reinforces the frippery of the stage-show’s title and suggests that this ridiculous performance will not just run for ‘weeks’ but forever, each performance being a moment in an interminable conveyer belt pageantry of cheap thrills.

Steiner first exhibited at J. B. Neumann’s Print Room in February 1926, and the following year his photographs were shown at the Machine-Age Exposition, which was held in May at Steinway Hall. These exhibitions coincided with subtle changes in Steiner’s work, which brought it closer to a more generic machine aesthetic (Fig. 92). He was by no means the first American photographer to approach such imagery. Strand, Sheeler, and Shamburg had first turned their cameras at oblique angles to capture the extraordinary geometry of New York around 1917. The stills from Sheeler and Strand’s *Manhatta* in *Vanity Fair* were praised for giving ‘so forceful a sense of the vast scale and mechanical precision of the skyscraper’.³³ Strand, in particular, had pioneered the machine aesthetic in American photography, when in 1922 he produced a series of razor-sharp, semi-abstract close-ups of his new Akeley movie camera (Fig. 93). He accompanied them with one of the few theoretical explications on the machine aesthetic in photography, printed in *Broom* in 1922 with the ominous title ‘Photography and the New God’. This article found Strand at a curious midway point between Stieglitz’s ‘art photography’ and a more dynamic investigation of the camera as a machine for producing mechanical imagery. He remained loyal to Stieglitz’s work, writing that ‘we find a highly evolved crystallization of the photographic principle, the unqualified

³² Ralph Steiner, quoted in Payne, Ralph Steiner’, p. 176.

³³ ‘Manhattan—“The Proud and Passionate City”’, *Vanity Fair*, April 1922, p. 51.

subjugation of a machine to the single purpose of expression'.³⁴ Yet alongside the residual commitment to the expressive properties of photography, Strand also judged America to be 'the supreme altar of the new God', that is the natural climate for machine photography, a tendency made equally of science and the spiritual.³⁵

Steiner later cited Strand as the major influence on his work. He first met him 'one day in 1926 or 1927' and 'was inspired by the excellence of Strand's work to do something about my technique'.³⁶ He did not comment, however, on the impact of Sheeler's work, acknowledging no influence, a probable consequence of the secondary status of photography in Sheeler's practice. This omission was nevertheless surprising as Sheeler and Steiner were both feted for industrial photography, were both committee members at the Machine-Age Exposition, both exhibited at J. B. Neumann's gallery, and both produced similarly angular photographs of the newly completed Delmonico building in 1926 (Fig. 94 and Fig. 95). Both were the subjects of *Vanity Fair* features that discussed how their work brought out the inherent Cubism of New York's architecture.³⁷ The most crucial difference was tone—Sheeler's work was epic, solemn, and cool, whereas Steiner's was dynamic, witty, and nearly abstract. The common ground between their work was mostly confined to the mid-Twenties, the moment when Steiner's photography was most engaged with the machine aesthetic, and when his commercial work and 'art' photography seemed, like Sheeler's work, to be barely distinguishable.

As Agha put it, Steiner was a much-in-demand photographer in the mid-Twenties: 'the skyscraper became a speciality with Steiner, and whenever a skyscraper was to be photographed he was invited to do it'.³⁸ In 1928, many of his photographs from the mid-1920s were used to illustrate Paul Frankl's *New Dimensions*, a survey of contemporary design from sculpture to textiles. Frankl's study celebrated the skyscraper as an exemplar of the harmonious liaisons between designers and businessmen, writing

³⁴ Paul Strand, 'Photography and the New God', *Broom*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 1922, p. 148.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 150.

³⁶ Steiner, *A Point of View*, p. 11.

³⁷ 'Cubist Architecture in New York', *Vanity Fair* January 1921; 'The Island of Giants: Some Cubistic Views of New York's Skyscrapers—Or, The Last and Most Improbable of Sinbad's Tours', *Vanity Fair*, October 1928.

³⁸ M. F. Agha, 'Ralph Steiner', p. 37.

that ‘the skyscraper is certainly the monument of American business and American enterprise. This has struck the keynote of our civilization’.³⁹ Yet Steiner’s work inspired many other associations. A case in point is his photograph *Maiden Lane* (Fig. 96). It was referred to as a stage ‘backdrop’, as an exemplar of intoxicated vision in *Vanity Fair*, and as evidence that ‘all skyscrapers have been whittled to a point’ by Frank Lloyd Wright in his polemic on ‘The Tyranny of the Skyscraper’.⁴⁰ The success of each version depends on the effectiveness of the caption as a ‘parasitic message designed to connote the image, to “quicken” it with one or more second-order signifieds’.⁴¹

A series of photographs of industrial sites and skyscrapers reproduced in *Theatre Arts Monthly* in February 1927 connected Steiner’s work to Soviet imagery. The editorial captions emphasized the photographs’ relevance to the magazine with descriptions such as ‘a gasoline tank as a constructivist setting that is nearer to the spirit of industrialism than most of the constructivist settings that have come out of Russia’ (Fig. 97).⁴² The image is indeed comparable to contemporary stage set designs, such as Louis Lozowick’s set for George Kaiser’s *Gas*, which itself was based on Liubov Popova’s *The Magnanimous Cuckold* of 1922 (Fig. 56 and Fig. 58). Yet this is not a question of derivation, but rather that Steiner was increasingly moving in circles in which trends in cultural production in Europe, and more specifically Germany and the Soviet Union, were monitored, and often assimilated.

Yet whilst New Vision techniques were evident in the work of many American photographers throughout the 1920s, European and Soviet practitioners were little known in America until the end of the decade. Following the 1929 Film und Foto show, there were some important American exhibitions of international trends in contemporary

³⁹ Paul Frankl, *New Dimensions*, New York: Payson and Clarke, 1928, p. 61. Frankl was a member of AUDAC. See Chapter One.

⁴⁰ *Theatre Arts Monthly*, February 1927, 4 Photos, p. 102; ‘Cubistic Phases of New York: The Camera Records, For the First Time, Some New Angles of the City’s Architecture’, *Vanity Fair*, April 1928. One caption read: ‘actually, these reeling structures may be experienced by a perfectly sober citizen, in that chaste of streets: Maiden Lane’), p. 58; Frank Lloyd Wright ‘The Tyranny of the Skyscraper’, *Creative Art*, No.8, 1931, p. 332.

⁴¹ Roland Barthes, ‘The Photographic Message’, 1961, in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. S. Heath, London: Fontana Press, 1977, p. 25.

⁴² *Theatre Arts Monthly*, February 1927, p. 103.

photography, such as Lincoln Kirstein's Photography Exhibition of 1930, the 1931 Exhibition of Foreign Advertising, the Albright Art Gallery's Modern Photography: At Home and Abroad of 1932, the Brooklyn Museum's International Photographers of the same year, and several smaller exhibitions at the Julien Levy Gallery from the early 1930s onwards, in particular Modern European Photographers of 1932. These exhibitions introduced an American audience to Moholy-Nagy, Herbert Bayer, Lucia Moholy, Umbo, Eli Lotar, André Kertesz, Brassai, and Eugene Atget. In contrast with theatre, film, and architecture, Russian photographers were almost completely unknown in America, as their work was neither exhibited nor reproduced in publications—Lissitzky and Rodchenko were known as artists rather than photographers.

Experimentation in American photography largely preceded European and Russian photographic practices. Whilst Stieglitz, Bruguère, and Coburn were exploring abstraction and light effects, as well as developing a hard-edged Realism, in the 1910s Europeans were still in thrall to the nineteenth century camera club practices that Stieglitz had so effectively assaulted in America, that is excepting the work of the Italian Futurists Gustavo Bonaventura and Anton Bragaglia (Fig. 98).⁴³ In contrast with other media, confidence with a new medium perhaps allowed Americans such as Strand, Shamburg, Sheeler, Steiner, and Outerbridge to develop their experiments in abstraction around 1920 seemingly independent from their European counterparts. Yet many of the early European experimenters were artists who worked in photography, whereas the Americans were all professional photographers. This partly explains the greater emphasis on theory in Europe, and its near absence in America. Likewise, Europeans were more often connected with avant-garde institutional structures—such as Moholy-Nagy at the Bauhaus, Jacques-André Boiffard with the Surrealist movement, and Rodchenko and the Soviet group Oktober—whereas in America, especially after the collapse of *Camera Work*, photographers worked independently as freelancers, in competition with one another. The exceptions were, of course, those American photographers working in Europe, such as Coburn and Man Ray, who were connected to Vorticism and Surrealism respectively.

⁴³ See Giovanni Lista, ed., *Futurism and Photography*, ex. cat., London: Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art, 2001.

Moholy-Nagy's New Vision was not a familiar term in American discourse on photography. Indeed, whilst Moholy-Nagy had discussed new techniques in photography since the early 1920s, the term was only properly developed in the 1932 essay 'A New Instrument of Vision'. Here he identified a 'way of bringing (optically) something new to the world', and located the New Vision in 'eight varieties of photographic vision', which were photograms, reportage, snapshots, 'prolonged time exposures', infra-red photography, radiography, photomontage, and 'distorted seeing', such as 'exposure through a lens fitted with prisms'.⁴⁴ The basis of the New Vision, if not the term, dated back to the mid-1920s, most specifically in his groundbreaking 1925 study *Malerei, Fotografie, Film (Painting, Photography, Film)*. In this he wrote that 'the camera has offered us amazing possibilities, which we are only just beginning to exploit', adding that 'it is only in recent years that the course of development has allowed us to see beyond the specific instance and recognize the creative consequence...our vision has only lately developed sufficiently to grasp these connections'.⁴⁵ Moholy-Nagy's theories were formed in response to Soviet Constructivism. In 1922 he had written that 'Constructivism is not confined to the picture frame and the pedestal. It expands into industrial design, into houses, objects, forms. It is the Socialism of vision—the common property of all men'.⁴⁶ The new way of seeing was stimulated by a mechanical device, the Constructivist camera eye, and Moholy-Nagy placed the machine at the centre of Constructivism: 'this is our century—technology, machine, Socialism...the art of our century, its mirror and voice, is *Constructivism*'.⁴⁷

Solomon Godeau has charted Moholy-Nagy's gradual abandonment of the revolutionary element of Constructivism throughout the 1920s, citing *Film und Foto* as the seminal moment. Yet Soviet Radical Formalism in photography was not evident until the middle of the decade. Indeed, Margarita Tupitsyn's history of the Soviet

⁴⁴ László Moholy-Nagy, 'A New Instrument of Vision', 1932, in R. Kontelanatz, ed., *Moholy-Nagy*, London: Allen Lane, 1974, pp. 50-52.

⁴⁵ László Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*, 1925, trans. Janet Seligman, London: Lund Humphries, 1969, p. 7.

⁴⁶ László Moholy-Nagy, 'Constructivism and the Proletariat', *MA*, May 1922, reprinted in R. Kontelanatz ed., *Moholy-Nagy*, p. 185.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

photography takes 1924 as the starting point, that is after Moholy-Nagy had begun his experiments in photography.⁴⁸ Solomon Godeau transplants the narrative of a transformation of forms from a revolutionary context into an apolitical corporate one onto photography, an uneasy manoeuvre in that 'Constructivist photography' suffered from photography's resistance to categorization. By the time of the American Bauhaus, the Radical Formalism of Oktober had long been extinguished, along with the cinematic, theatrical, and literary avant-gardes. A further problem is Solomon Godeau's elision of the interactions of the American, German, and Soviet avant-gardes in the 1920s and 1930s.

Admittedly these interactions were most limited in relation to photography. Yet Moholy-Nagy's theories were known in America since 1923, when his short piece 'Light: A Medium of Plastic Expression' was published in *Broom*.⁴⁹ More recently, his essay 'The Future of the Photographic Process' had appeared in the February 1929 edition of the Franco-American journal *transition*. One photograph, a dynamic abstraction of mirrored objects, was reproduced in the Spring/ Summer 1926 edition of *The Little Review*. Harry Alan Potamkin penned the first major investigation of his theories in 1930, in a series on German photographers that also covered the work of Hans Finsler and Wolfgang Peterhans. Potamkin had met Moholy-Nagy at the Bauhaus on a trip to Europe in 1928 and in this piece he showed his familiarity with the New Vision by quoting from *Painting, Photography, Film*:

Registration of situations, of reality;
Objective portraits;
Advertising, political propaganda, posters; up to
Expressive portraits;
Interpenetration and organization of scenes, combining and projecting one upon the other and next to other, achieving what he calls a super-reality, a utopia of imagery, jest and wit by means of juxtaposition;
Composition of photo-pictures, i.e. a narrative conveyed by the composition of photographs instead of verbal text;
Typofotos;
Absolute abstract light projections in planes or into space;

⁴⁸ Margarita Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937*, Yale University Press, 1996.

⁴⁹ László Moholy-Nagy, 'Light: A Medium of Plastic Expression', *Broom*, March 1923.

Simultaneous movies.⁵⁰

Moholy-Nagy's New Vision was powered by technical experimentation, and Potamkin listed photograms (camera-less photographs) typofotos (montages of typography and photography), polykinos (simultaneous movies), and photoplastic studies (photomontages). If Potamkin merely reported Moholy-Nagy's ideas, then the text was nonetheless important for introducing the core of the New Vision into America.

If European photography and its theories were obscure in America, then some Americans were known in Europe. In 1926 Steiner's work was reproduced in the German magazine *Das Kunstblatt* where it was celebrated, alongside Paul Outerbridge Jr's photographs, as:

'Precision work. Exact representation of form. No pictorial Romanticism. Unconditional involvement with technique. Pushing technical possibilities to the utmost. Clear picture architecture. Emphasis on plastic values. Concerned interest in the form world of every day surroundings. Through close-ups things take on a new aspect.'⁵¹

In Germany Steiner was incorporated into an avant-garde schema of photography. In New York, however, such photography was more often treated as a novelty, and was seldom accompanied by theoretical statements.

In 1928 *Vanity Fair* published two articles relating Steiner's work to Cubism, echoing the two pieces on Strand and Sheeler of 1921 and 1922, under the titles 'Cubistic Phases of New York: The Camera Records for the First Time, Some New Angles of the City's Architecture' of April 1928, and 'The Island of Giants: Some Cubistic Views of New York's Skyscrapers—Or, The Last and Most Improbable of Sinbad's Tours' of October 1928.⁵² These pieces typified the magazine's witty, urbane editorial approach featuring captions such as 'should this portrait of 47 Broadway fail to

⁵⁰ Harry Alan Potamkin, 'L. Moholy-Nagy and his Theories of Photography', *American Photography*, May 1930, p. 254.

⁵¹ 'Photographie in Amerika'. *Das Kunstblatt*. X. 1926. Translation taken from Beaumont Newhall. 'Photo Eye of the 1920s: The Deutsche Werkbund Exhibition of 1929' in David Mellor, ed., *Germany: The New Photography, 1927-1933*, London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978.

p. 83.

⁵²'The Island of Giants', p. 65.

make you gasp, please consult your psychoanalyst immediately' (Fig. 99).⁵³ The accompanying text explained that even a 'sober citizen' could experience the disorientating, intoxicating qualities of these photographs. The supposed Cubism of the architecture was a consequence of the zoning restrictions on skyscrapers, introduced in 1916 to allow air and light into the streets, and thus Steiner's photographs witnessed 'what happens when Cubism meets Cubism'.⁵⁴ The photographs were presented as a clever diversion for knowing urbanites simpatico with modern art.

For Agha, art editor of *Vanity Fair*, there was 'nothing elaborately conscious' in Steiner's decision to 'point his Graflex upwards and snap the skyscrapers'.⁵⁵ He wrote that Steiner:

was told that he belonged to the cubistic school, that his photos were plastic symphonies and other things to that effect. He was mildly surprised. He had heard before of Cubism from a painter friend, who heard about it in the Café de la Rotonde, but it never occurred to him that he, himself, was mixed up with the esthetic Messiahs.⁵⁶

Steiner's resistance to the dominant theoretical model for 'art photography' practised by Stieglitz partly explains his eschewal of theoretical cant—Agha wrote simply that 'he is not given to theorizing and doesn't like to explain why he makes things this way and the other'.⁵⁷ Yet if Steiner was avowedly untheoretical, then his participation in the Machine-Age Exposition, as a committee member and as the sole photographer, found his work aligned with the discourse on the machine aesthetic.

As I showed in Chapter One, critical reactions to the exhibition were scant, but the few responses to the show unanimously praised Steiner's photographs. These reviews are the only indicators of which photographs were on display, as Steiner's catalogue entry merely stated 'photographs', with no accompanying reproductions. In *The Arts*, Herbert Lippmann wrote that Steiner's photographs of 'high-tension wiring and typewriter keys' exemplified that 'photographs although static can look more dynamic

⁵³ 'Cubistic Phases of New York: The Camera Records, For the First Time, Some New Angles of the City's Architecture', *Vanity Fair*, April 1928, p. 58.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 58.

⁵⁵ M. F. Agha, 'Ralph Steiner', p. 35

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 37.

than machinery itself when stationary'.⁵⁸ In *New Masses*, Genevieve Taggard also referred to Steiner's 'exquisite' photographs of wiring and typewriter keys.⁵⁹ The typewriter keys were reproduced in *New Masses*, with one of Lozowick's *Machine Elements*, to accompany the review.

Payne argues reasonably that both Steiner's photography and the Machine-Age Exposition idealized the machine. But in contrast to the stated aims and revolutionary projections of the European, and especially Soviet, avant-garde, Steiner's photographs 'endorsed' rather than critiqued American capitalism. She writes further that 'the machine aesthetic in United States photography was formally and ideologically consistent with the capitalist ideology underlining commercial production'.⁶⁰ Thus Steiner's photographs, whether produced for commercial purposes or not, were signifiers of a specific ideology. However, this interpretation of ideology reduces Steiner's work of this period as little more than an advertisement for capitalism.

There is a danger in the application of phrases such as 'capitalist ideology' to assume that a homogeneous system of beliefs can be simply read off works of art and, furthermore, that it can be identified so readily. Such a position is redolent of a certain strand of Marxist cultural thinking, from Frederic Antal to Nicos Hadjinicolaou, which positions works of art as the materialization of specific ideologies. In Hadjinicolaou's *Art History and Class Struggle* of 1973, ideology in art is broken down into 'positive visual ideologies', which endorse, and 'critical visual ideologies', which engage critically.⁶¹ In contrast, if the machine aesthetic in American art is viewed less as a 'positive visual ideology' but rather in terms of a complex process of signification then the ideological functions of the images are not so tethered. In the 1920s the machine aesthetic would, by nature of the subject matter, be oriented around relations of production and consumption. Yet due to the parity of form in a machine-based art produced in different contexts, the USA and the USSR for example, the exact signification of the machine aesthetic is frustrated by the disparate ideological positions

⁵⁸ Herbert Lippmann, 'The Machine-Age Exposition', *The Arts*, June 1927, p. 325.

⁵⁹ Genevieve Taggard, 'The Ruskinian Boys See Red', *New Masses*, July 1927, p. 18.

⁶⁰ Payne, 'Ralph Steiner', p. 132

⁶¹ Nicos Hadjinicolaou, *Art History and Class Struggle*, trans. L. Asmal, London: Pluto Press, 1973, pp.158-178.

which are purportedly signified, such as a ‘capitalist ideology’ versus a ‘communist ideology’. The referent in each would be overloaded with these ambiguous interchangeable signs. If photographs, therefore, refer to each other formally and iconographically across ideological formations then one might posit a weakness in a machine aesthetic to signify exactly—in short, the machine aesthetic destabilized the signifier from the signified. It became, to use Valentin Voloshinov’s terms, ‘multi-accentual’ with an ‘inner dialectic quality’, a contradictory movement where class struggle is played out within the sign itself.⁶²

This non-fixity of the machine sign can also be judged in other related ideological formations. As both Jane Heap’s ‘Machine-Age Exposition’ and Louis Lozowick’s ‘The Americanization of Art’ catalogue essays spoke stirringly of American industry, Payne argues that the machine age rhetoric here was ultimately nationalistic.⁶³ Yet the Machine-Age Exposition was international in scope and intention—indeed, seven countries were represented. It was cited in the *New York Times* as the first showcase of Soviet architecture in America.⁶⁴ Rather, given the stated interests of both authors in Constructivism, the ‘Americanism’ of these essays should be situated in relation to ‘Amerikanismus’ and ‘Amerikanizm’, the German and Soviet counterparts that situated America as an emblem of technological modernity.

Indeed, John Stomberg has contrasted American and German photography with ‘Amerikanismus’.⁶⁵ He cites Henry Ford’s notion of a ‘United States of the World’, where machinery rather than ‘preaching, propaganda, or the written word’ would be the unifying principle.⁶⁶ He writes:

⁶² Valentin Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, 1929, trans. L. Matejka and I. R. Titunik, Harvard University Press, 1986, p. 23.

⁶³ Payne, ‘Ralph Steiner’, p.151.

⁶⁴ ‘New Architecture Develops in Russia’, *New York Times*, 29 May 1927, II/I.

⁶⁵ John Stomberg, ‘A “United States of the World”, Industry and Photography Between the Wars’, in Kim Sichel, ed., *From Icon to Irony: German and American Industrial Photography*, ex. cat, Boston University Art Gallery, November 4—December 17, 1995. Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1995.

⁶⁶ Henry Ford, ‘Machinery, the New Messiah’, *Forum* 79, March 1928, pp. 362-3, quoted in *ibid*, p.17.

though there were attempts to stake a national claim on the industrial image, the impact of mechanization proved stronger than any nationalist impulse. Nowhere was Ford's vision of a "United States of the world" more apparent than in German and American industrial photography of the 1920s.⁶⁷

Ford's rationalization of the industrial process, most famously witnessed in the development, by his engineers, of the production line, and Frederick Winslow Taylor's theories concerning the standardization and rationalization of labour were feted in the Soviet Union as the means with which to realize Socialism. Lenin's famous statement that 'the possibility of building Socialism depends entirely on our success in combining the Soviet power and the Soviet organization of administration with the up-to-date achievements of capitalism' was one form of 'Amerikanizm' where the tools of capitalism would advance the transition to Communism.⁶⁸ In 1919, Lenin told a *Chicago Daily News* correspondent that 'we are decidedly for an economic understanding with America—with all countries but *especially* with America'.⁶⁹ Yet Lenin's 'Amerikanizm' was essentially practical. A year later, Lenin told the American journalist Lincoln Eyre that although the American government 'is instituting more violently repressive measures not only against the socialists but against the working class in general', nevertheless 'we shall need American manufacturers—locomotives, automobiles, etc.—more than those of any other country'.⁷⁰ The New Economic Policy was conceived to secure the Revolution by reviving the economy after the ruinous effects of the Great War and the Civil War. Lenin urged that 'we must organize in Russia the

⁶⁷ Stomberg, *ibid*, p. 17.

⁶⁸ V. I. Lenin, 'The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government', *Izvestia*, 1918, *Collected Works*, 4th English Edition, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972, Volume 27, p. 259. The most ardent exponent of Taylorism in the USSR was actually Alexei Gastev, director of the Central Institute of Labour from 1920 and head of a 'Time League' that was commissioned to make all aspects of Soviet life as efficient as possible, even to the extent of stipulating economy in language to save time. Alexander Bogdanov accused Gastev of treating the worker as little more than a machine. See Brandon Taylor, *Art and Literature under the Bolsheviks, Volume One: The Crisis of Renewal 1917-1924*, London: Pluto Press, 1991, pp. 121-122.

⁶⁹ V. I. Lenin, 'Answers to Questions Put by a *Chicago Daily News* Correspondent', October 27 1919, reprinted in *V. I. Lenin on the United States of America*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1967, p. 417.

⁷⁰ V. I. Lenin, 'Talk with Lincoln Eyre, Correspondent of *The World*', *ibid*, p.447.

Taylor system and systematically try it out and adapt it to our ends'.⁷¹ Some cultural programmes, such as Meyerhold's Taylorist ballet, crudely reflected these aims.

Lozowick recalled the 'wild optimism' of this cult of America on a trip to the USSR in 1922: 'almost everyone evinced immediate interest in America, not, however, in its art but in its machines. The two names heard most often in this connection were Ford and Edison'.⁷² For Lozowick, 'it was this wild optimism that brought the country out of its crisis'.⁷³ Margaret Bourke-White succinctly captured the paradox: 'Every Russian admires the conveyor. The conveyor is the symbol of the Amerikanski tempo. But the Russians have no more idea how to use the conveyor than a group of school children'.⁷⁴ Whereas the American conveyor belt ran seamlessly through lines of busy workers, the Russian version faltered and stopped, whilst 'one Russian is screwing in a tiny little bolt and twenty other Russians are standing around him watching, talking it over, smoking cigarettes, arguing'.⁷⁵ Despite this, the Russians 'idolize the machine in a sense that no American ever could or would'.⁷⁶

Yet there were nuances to 'Amerikanizm', and perhaps the most notable case was Vladimir Mayakovsky. His celebrated visit to New York in 1925 was accompanied by a *New York Times* profile entitled 'Fiery Russian Poet Scolds New York'. Louis Rich reported that:

Mayakovsky has come to America to see with his own eyes the things he has sung about. He has come to inspect the things glorified by him as the future riches of Russia—machinery, inventions, airplanes, radio, large factories, colossal buildings, underground railways, all those things that make a triumphant industrialism. The head of the futurists in Russia, he also wants to see how much of his futurist ideal has been realized by the greatest of all industrial countries.⁷⁷

⁷¹ V. I. Lenin, 'The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government', p. 257.

⁷² Louis Lozowick, *Survivor for a Dead Age: The Memoirs of Louis Lozowick*, ed., Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997, p. 226.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Margaret Bourke-White, *Eyes on Russia*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931, p. 118.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 118.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 119.

⁷⁷ Louis Rich, 'Fiery Russian Poet Scolds New York', *New York Times Magazine*, 11 October 1925, p. 12.

Unfortunately, Mayakovsky was disappointed with America's industry, and dismissed New York as an 'unspeakably dirty city' that made him an 'enemy of large cities', finding Americans to be 'inert, flabby, sour-faced Philistines, interested only in keeping to themselves what they had gained'.⁷⁸ New York had 'mechanical culture' in 'excess', and only Brooklyn Bridge inspired his poetic imagination, albeit as a symbol of capitalist tyranny.⁷⁹ These thoughts were more thoroughly treated in his travelogue, 'My Discovery of America', which similarly lambasted America as a dirty, racist country. Mayakovsky's record of his visit to Detroit seemed antithetical to the spirit of 'Amerikanizm', but reminiscent of Paul Sifton's *The Belt* (see Chapter Two): 'At four o'clock at the Ford gates I watched the departing shift; people piled into streetcars and, exhausted, immediately fell asleep. Detroit has the greatest number of divorces. The Ford system makes workers impotent'.⁸⁰

If in the Soviet Union 'Amerikanizm', with some exceptions, corresponded with a strategy to implement Socialism—the much hoped for economic miracle without the problematic contradictions in relations of production—then in Germany the cult of America had different inflections. 'Amerikanismus' was more dramatically polysemic, as different groups debated an imagined America. Beeke Sell Tower describes the complex engagement of German artists with America as both 'ultramodern' and 'ultraprimitive', holding a fascination for Western adventure stories, jazz, and cinema in an invective against political and cultural conservatism—hurling the junk of *Zivilization* against the lofty edifice of *Kultur*. This was reflected in the Anglicization of artists' names, such as Helmut Herzfelde to John Heartfield and Bertolt Brecht to Bert Brecht. This primitivism was bound up with the idealization of the black American entertainer as the site of transgression, a residue of the rebellion of pre-War primitivists such as Die Brücke. A conjunction of jazz and mechanization was often made, for instance in Brecht's 1926 poem 'Song of the Machines', where the 'black stars' sing at work:

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Vladimir Mayakovsky, 'My Discovery of America', in Olga Peters Hasty and Susanne Fusso eds. and trans., *America Through Russian Eyes*, Yale University Press, p. 205.

As they make clothes, newspapers, waterpipes
 Railways and lamps, stoves and records
 They sing.⁸¹

This song of the machines, the rhythmic clatter of American modernity, ‘will soon be the world’s mother tongue’.⁸²

This connection of jazz with mechanization was also discussed in pejorative tones, as Tower notes, by those ‘conservative cultural critics’ who viewed ‘Amerikanismus’ with disdain and dread. Yet the simultaneous veneration for and disgust with America was not reflected in straightforward political oppositions such as ‘Left’ and ‘Right’. For example, whereas the right wing ideologues that published *Die Tat*, as Jeffrey Herf points out, were appalled by the vitiating intrusion of American rationalized production on the sacred German spirit, a portrait of Henry Ford adorned the walls of Adolph Hitler’s Munich office in 1931.⁸³ Indeed, Mary Nolan notes that ‘elements of Americanism were inserted discretely but firmly into Nazi society, where they coexisted with distinctly Nazi innovations—consumption and concentration camps, technological rationalization and racial annihilation’.⁸⁴ There was equal dispute amongst Communists who, as Nolan points out, ‘looked to Russia as a political and social model but could hardly have wished to emulate it technologically’.⁸⁵ The KPD, however, effectively followed the Soviet example of extracting the tools and processes of rationalized production but judged ‘Fordism not as a reformed version of capitalism but

⁸¹ Bertolt Brecht, ‘Song of the Machines’, 1926, trans. F. Jones, in John Willet and Ralph Manheim, eds., *Bertolt Brecht: Poems*, London: Methuen, 1976, p.127.

⁸² Ibid, p. 127.

⁸³ Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 42; Max Wallace, *The American Axis: Henry Ford, Charles Lindbergh, and the Rise of the Third Reich*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2003, p. 2.

⁸⁴ Mary Nolan, ‘Imagining America, Modernizing Germany’, in Thomas W. Knishes and Stephen Brockman, eds., *Dancing on the Volcano: Essays on the Culture of the Weimar Republic*, South Carolina: Camden House Inc, 1994, p. 84.

⁸⁵ Mary Nolan, *Visions of Modernity: American Business and the Modernization of Germany*, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 21.

as more intensely exploitative'.⁸⁶ Not everyone on the Left, therefore, shared Brecht and Dada's ribald Amerikanismus.

The architect Erich Mendelsohn travelled to America in 1924 and took numerous photographs during his visit, many of which were stylistically and thematically similar to Steiner's work. He published these photographs in two volumes, *Amerika* of 1926 and *Amerika-Russland-Europa* of 1929. In *Amerika* the photographs (Fig. 100) were accompanied by evocative captions describing sights in New York, Detroit, Chicago and Buffalo. For example, New York's Equitable Trust Building was 'at the end of the street-canyon, all day long in the sun. View—impetus—image of power'.⁸⁷ The introductory essay was strikingly ambivalent about America. Describing 'Amerikanismus' as a 'romantic prejudice', Mendelsohn wrote that 'this country gives everything: the worst strata of Europe, abortions of civilization, but also hopes for a new world'.⁸⁸ For Mendelsohn, the visitor to New York is faced with bewildering, disorientating 'valleys of skyscrapers' and is shocked by 'altered, intensified dimensions of vital energy, space relationships and traffic'.⁸⁹ Yet the shock was short lived, and 'soon the initial excitement is allayed and the altered scale becomes customary'.⁹⁰ His photographs of New York, like Steiner's, show that prior moment, where rational judgement was suspended and the city was made strange and alienating through distorted angularity. If Mendelsohn was ambiguous in his judgement of America he nonetheless understood its importance as a model for the Soviet Union and its technological superiority. In *Russland/ Europa/ Amerika*, he noted that 'the new Russia grabs for America which has become master of the world'.⁹¹

If in Germany 'Amerikanismus' invoked multiple, contradictory responses to the impact of American capitalist production techniques and mass culture on German *Kultur*, the intersection of photography with industry was a moment of potential

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 41.

⁸⁷ Erich Mendelsohn, *Amerika*, 1926, New York: Dover, 1993, p. 2.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. xi.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. ix.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Erich Mendelsohn, *Russland/ Europa/ Amerika: ein Architektonischer Querschnitt*, (*Russia, Europe, America: An Architectural Cross Section*), 1929, trans. John Gabriel, Basel: Birkhäuser, 1989, p. 6.

cohesion. Stomberg notes the similarity of photographs associated with the terms 'Precisionism' in America and 'Neue Sachlichkeit' in Germany and compares Sheeler and Bourke-White's photography with that of the German Albert Renger-Patzsch. Katherine Grant Sterne, however, had actually made this conjunction, in 1932:

the Russo-German cult of Sachlichkeit is essentially an American invention. If the Germans have been prophets of the 'new objectivity' in art, and the Russians its economic and ethical exponents, it is the Americans who, without bothering much with aesthetic theories and manifestos, have developed the notion until it can be safely transported to an alien soil.⁹²

In photography 'Sachlichkeit' was most evident 'in the Rouge River series of Charles Sheeler'.⁹³ Sheeler's images for Ford's River Rouge car plant, commissioned to accompany the launch of the new Model A car in 1927, and Renger-Patzsch's 1928 photographs for the Herrenwyk blast furnace (Fig. 101 and Fig. 102), for example, present the industrial plant as a monumental site, a cathedral of capitalism in a rationalized secular world (intriguingly Sheeler's next project was an extensive study of Chartres Cathedral). Terry Smith writes here of 'an industry without producers, process, or product...an industry of image, look, an abstract domain, a suitably clear background for the pure act of consumption of the sign to be sold, the Model A'.⁹⁴ Such sentiments echo comments made by Brecht, quoted by Benjamin in *A Small History of Photography* of 1931:

a photograph of the Krupp works or the A.E.G. tells us next to nothing about these institutions. Actual reality has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relations—the factory, say—means that they are no longer explicit. So something in fact must be *built up*, something artificial, posed.⁹⁵

⁹² Katherine Grant Sterne, 'American and European Photography', *Parnassus*, March 1932, p. 16.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Terry Smith, *Making The Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America*, University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 115.

⁹⁵ Bertolt Brecht, cited in Walter Benjamin 'A Small History of Photography', 1931, *One-Way Street*, trans., Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, London: Verso, 1979, p. 255.

Benjamin himself privileged the incisive, penetrative cinematic montage and photomontage of Constructivism, which broke through the fetishized surfaces of what he dismissed as 'creative' photography, such as Renger-Patzsch's 1928 collection *Die Welt ist Schön* (*The World is Beautiful*). For Benjamin, 'the true face of this kind of photographic creativity is the advertisement or association'.⁹⁶

Benjamin favoured Moholy-Nagy and Germaine Krull but warned of 'the greatest danger facing photography today, the touch of the commercial artist'.⁹⁷ Stomberg argues that photographs by Krull (Fig. 103), who worked both as a commercial and artist photographer, 'straddle' the rival positions occupied by Moholy-Nagy and Renger-Patzsch.⁹⁸ Yet Moholy-Nagy's increasing involvement in advertising work, which brought him acclaim in 1931 in New York, where he received a honourable mention at the Exhibition of Foreign Advertising, would undermine the fixity of those poles.⁹⁹ Thus the opposition of the radical rebuilding by Constructivism to the obfuscating gleam of the surfaces of the commodity in the reproduction and reflection by *Neue Sachlichkeit* was eroded by the fundamental equivalence that advertising brings. The point is that these were not stable categories and the fluidity of photographic practice shifted photographers out of alignment with any notional ideological basis, in Germany as in the United States.

Photographs by Americans and Germans were exhibited together at Film und Foto in 1929. Around 940 photographs were assembled for the Deutsche Werkbund Show by an international committee, which included Moholy-Nagy, El Lissitzky, Siegfried Giedion, Piet Zwart, Edward Steichen, and Edward Weston. The American section included Sheeler, Imogen Cunningham, Outerbridge Jr, Brett Weston, Steiner, and, when the exhibition travelled to Munich, Walker Evans.¹⁰⁰ As is typical of many photography exhibitions of the period, the catalogue did not list which works were

⁹⁶ Benjamin, *ibid.*, p. 255.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

⁹⁸ Stomberg, ' "A United States of the World"', p. 19.

⁹⁹ Ruth Green Harris, 'Further News of the Week', *New York Times*, 8 March 1931, VIII, 12: 4.

¹⁰⁰ Douglas Eklund, 'Exile's Return: The Early Work, 1928-34', in Maria Morris Hambourg, Jeff Rosenheim, Douglas Eklund, and Mia Fineman, eds., *Walker Evans*, ex. cat., New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000, p. 36.

shown, and only reproduced twenty-one of them, so we know only that Steiner exhibited ten photographs.¹⁰¹

Sheeler visited the exhibition and recorded later that ‘it was a very stimulating show, vast in scope and international in character, giving a very comprehensive account of photography at that time and splendidly presented in galleries well suited to the purpose’.¹⁰² Amidst the photograms, x-rays, photomontages, and double exposures, the photographs by Americans on display were uniformly ‘straight’ photographs. The expatriate Man Ray was the sole exception. Despite the early experiments of Francis Bruguière and Alvin Langdon Coburn, few photographers in the United States of the late 1920s veered from ‘straight’ photography. The reasons are hard to determine. Edward Weston’s practical response to Moholy-Nagy’s experiments may be indicative of the resistance of American photographers to those kinds of technical experimentation. He wrote, simply, ‘it only brings a question—why?’¹⁰³ Weston produced an essay on ‘America and Photography’ for the exhibition, which pilloried the ‘technical tricks and mawkishness’ of Nineteenth Century photographers that were ‘in direct contradiction to photography’.¹⁰⁴ He attacked one photographer for retouching work—‘why photograph at all then!’—as ‘lies’ and argued that the camera was ‘capable of revealing more than

¹⁰¹ However, there have been some reconstructions of the catalogue since 1929. In 1979, the Swiss magazine *Camera* reproduced Steiner’s *Trash* of 1929 in a special issue on the exhibition, although there is no indication that this photograph was on display. The exhaustive *Film und Foto der zwanziger Jahre: Eine Betrachtung der Internationalen Werkbundaustellung “Film und Foto” (Film and Photography in the 1920s—A Reconstruction of the Werkbund Exhibition “Film und Foto”)* reproduced two photographs by Steiner, both dated as c.1926. These were the high tension wire photograph that had appeared in Agha’s 1931 essay, and which was most likely the one referred to by Taggard in her review of the *Machine-Age Exhibition*, and a lesser-known shot of washing line and wires, which was one of the photographs printed in *Das Kunstblatt* in 1926 (later emulated by Evans, and also borrowed by Leyda in *A Bronx Morning*). As Evans was only included at the expanded Munich show, he was not recorded in the catalogue at all.

¹⁰² ‘Excerpts from Charles Sheeler’s 1937 ‘Unpublished Autobiography’, in Theodore Stebbins Jr, Gilles Mora, and Karen E. Hans, eds., *The Photography of Charles Sheeler*, New York: Bullfinch Press, 2002, p. 190.

¹⁰³ Edward Weston, *The Daybooks I, Mexico*, ed., Nancy Newhall, New York: 1973, p. 190.

¹⁰⁴ Edward Weston, ‘Amerika und Fotografie’, 1929, trans. R. Haran, in Gustav Stoltz, ed., *Film und Foto*, Stuttgart 1929, reprint edition, New York: Arno Press, 1979, p.13.

the eye sees'.¹⁰⁵ In other words, photomontage was merely a continuation of photographic 'Impressionism', the blurry sentimental imitation of painting.¹⁰⁶ In 1931, Steichen further explained this American resistance to photomontage:

the modern European photographer has not liberated himself as definitely. He still imitates his friend, the painter, with his so called "Photo-montage". He has merely chosen the modern painter as his prototype. We have gone well past the painful period of combining and tricking the banal commercial photograph—too far past it to be seriously tempted again into imitating even the brilliant technique or ideas of the Dadaists, or the Futurists by combining various and sundry photographs by pasting and retouching.¹⁰⁷

If Steichen and Weston objected to tampered photographs, then at *Film und Foto*, argues Solomon Godeau, photography itself was 'transfigured'—the revolutionary direction of the Soviet project, which had informed the New Vision, was buried under the 'technological glamour of elevators, skyscrapers, airplanes, and cranes'.¹⁰⁸ Her narrative follows Moholy-Nagy's withdrawal from an avowedly socialist position, whereby he apparently drew inspiration from Soviet photography, to the slick advertising master of later years. She writes 'the formal innovations of Russian photography were nowhere more thoroughly grasped or intensively exploited than in the burgeoning and sophisticated German advertising industry'.¹⁰⁹ However, Soviet Radical Formalism was in evidence at the exhibition. Indeed, of the six essays in the catalogue three concerned Soviet work—one covered photography, two addressed film. W. Jemtschuschny provided a survey of Russian photography that equated Moholy-Nagy's photography with Rodchenko's work for the LEF. Like Weston, he attacked 'artistic' photography, yet went further in distinguishing 'experiments in "abstract" photography' from those 'reporters endeavouring to capture real life'.¹¹⁰ In this respect, Radical

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Edward Steichen, 'Commercial Photography', R. L. Leonard, ed., *Annual of American Design 1931*, American Union of Decorative Artists and Craftsmen (AUDAC), New York: Ives Washburn, 1931, p. 159.

¹⁰⁸ Solomon-Godeau, 'Radical Formalism Disarmed', p. 91.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 90.

¹¹⁰ W. Jemtschuschny, 'Russland und Fotografie', trans. R. Haran, in Gustav Stoltz, *Film und Foto*, p. 15.

Formalism—evident in ‘new unexpected foreshortenings, unusual perspectives, bold light and shade combinations’—was a means of capturing ‘social reality’.¹¹¹ To be fair, Solomon-Godeau’s thesis correctly judged that the force of these claims was diminished by the apolitical technological optimism of the exhibition.

Film und Foto was retrospective, a summation of trends in photography mostly of the previous decade. It was, by extension, a last gasp of the fervour that accompanied the technological strand of Amerikanismus. By the end of the year, as the shockwaves of the Wall Street Crash decimated the world economy and hurled Germany into depression, faith in the technological achievements of American capitalism appeared increasingly delusional. In February 1929 Brecht had already mocked the machine aesthetic in a poem entitled ‘700 Intellectuals Pray to an Oil Tank’, and was soon writing an obituary for ‘Amerikanismus’. In an ironic epitaph entitled ‘Late Lamented Fame of the Giant City of New York’, Brecht conjured up the image of a city in ruins, a lost civilization of the recent past. The machines now ‘lie in huge heaps (the biggest in the world) and rust like the machines of the Old World (in smaller heaps)’.¹¹² The skyscrapers, which once sprouted at a ferocious rate, are now ‘contemptible hovels’, which no one can afford to rent. The giant bridges now ‘link scrapheap with scrapheap’, and hopes of recovery are ‘based on the hope that tomorrow the rain will fall upwards’.¹¹³

Such sentiments initially seem far removed from the American poet Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*, an epic paean to Brooklyn Bridge, also published in 1929. Conceived as a ‘mystical synthesis of America’, it was an ambivalent contribution to the mythic discourse on America of the 1920s. *The Bridge* was published in the months before the Wall Street Crash, and was the outcome of several years work. Invoking Whitman, the Settlers, and Atlantis, Crane’s theme of the ‘quest for a new world’, as Alan Trachtenberg puts it, situated the bridge as an archetype in tension with the chaos of the

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Bertolt Brecht, ‘Late Lamented Fame of the Giant City of New York’, 1930, trans. F. Jones, in John Willet and Ralph Manheim, eds., *Bertolt Brecht: Poems*, London: Methuen, 1976, pp.171-172.

¹¹³ Ibid.

city.¹¹⁴ Brooklyn Bridge was the muse of poetic ruminations that emphasized its symbolic potency since its completion in 1883. The bridge attracted artists across different media. Joseph Stella and John Marin painted it. In Vladimir Mayakovsky's 1925 poem Brooklyn Bridge was a capitalist suicide machine, as 'the unemployed jumped headfirst into the Hudson' from this 'mile of steel'.¹¹⁵ This was echoed in John Dos Passos's novel *Manhattan Transfer*, where the destitute Bud Korpenning ends his misery the same way.¹¹⁶ It was frequently photographed, and many photographers, from Sheeler, Steiner, and Sherril Schell to countless tourist photographs, reiterated the generic abstraction of the central axis viewpoint. Walker Evans, who lived near to Crane on the Brooklyn shore, photographed the bridge from a variety of angles. Two of his photographs were reproduced in the second edition of Crane's poem in 1930. These were not produced to illustrate *The Bridge* but were parallel, though not equivalent, responses to the structure that towered over their daily lives. Whereas the convolutions of Crane's text and the archaic address to the bridge as 'Thee' married with the gothic stylings of the bridge itself, in lines such as 'Te Deum Laudamus, for thy teeming span!', Evans's 'sparse' photographs of the giant structure, as John Hill and Gilles Mora note, bear 'the stamp of Constructivism' (Fig. 104 and Fig. 105).¹¹⁷

Evans himself had literary aspirations, which had led him on the *de rigueur* transatlantic voyage to Paris in 1926, aged twenty-three. He enrolled at the Collège de la Guild for French lessons where an early homework assignment, a translation of a letter to his girlfriend, saw him assuming the role of the observer of modern life, detailing eating and literary habits of the day. Yet Paris was not the moveable feast of myth, and days spent at Shakespeare and Co desperately trying to muster up the courage to approach James Joyce on his routine visits did not culminate in a literary career. However, this early intellectual posturing is a crucial key to Evans's emergence as a

¹¹⁴ Alan Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol*, Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 149.

¹¹⁵ Vladimir Mayakovsky, 'Brooklyn Bridge', in Vladimir Markov and Merrill Sparks, eds., *Modern Russian Poetry*, London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1966, p. 549.

¹¹⁶ John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer*, 1925, London: Penguin Classics, 2000, p. 119.

¹¹⁷ Hart Crane, *The Bridge*, 1929, New York: Liveright, 1933, p. 8; Gilles Mora and John T. Hill, *Walker Evans: The Hungry Eye*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1993, p. 28.

photographer. His first experiments in Paris and on his return to New York in 1927 were the work of an amateur, granted, but one sufficiently versed in Baudelaire to conflate the photographer of the streets with the flâneur (although Baudelaire himself resisted the medium)—in short, to understand photography and literature as analogues.

In an untitled poem from 1929/30 Evans engaged with the themes of technology and the city. He wrote:

cross
check
cube yourselves
black and white in the sun
it is nothing to me that you are a grain elevator
your wires carry another word
to my eye.¹¹⁸

This line may relate to photographic expeditions Evans made with his roommate Paul Grotz, where he assimilated machine aesthetic techniques by photographing factories and grain elevators (Fig. 106). In a further rumination, Evans scoffed at the modern cityscape. He wrote:

one part of the city
impaled
punctured cubes
full of stenographers desires banalities
not good enough for their shell.¹¹⁹

An appended note underlines the disenchantment of this stanza: ‘to hell with the filthy cubes of the city—architecturally speaking. Fourteen thousand two hundred *and* seventy three tragedies, 67284 mysteries, several obscure dramas with or without poetry there in the night’.¹²⁰

If Evans’s poetic engagement with the city at times approached revulsion, there was a marked ironic tone that was more pronounced in his photographs. The dark

¹¹⁸ Walker Evans, ‘Cross’, 1929-30, Rosenheim and Eklund, eds., *Unclassified: A Walker Evans Anthology*, p. 71.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

humour here does not suggest retreat. Unlike Stieglitz, Evans did not recoil. Yet his attitude to Stieglitz was, unlike that of Steiner, one of grudging respect. Evans later recalled, in a 1971 interview, that he 'was stimulated by Stieglitz' when he met him in 1929. Indeed, in a letter of June 1929 Evans wrote to his friend Hanns Skolle, a German painter, 'did you ever see Stieglitz's photographs in the print room at the Metropolitan? He has a portrait of O'Keefe that must be one of the best things I'll ever see. Great guns!'¹²¹ Evans nonetheless remembered 'when I got around to looking at photography I found him somebody to work against. He was artistic and romantic. It gave me an esthetic to sharpen my own against—a counter esthetic'.¹²²

A review of several photographic volumes for Kirstein's *Hound and Horn* was the nearest Evans came to defining this 'counter-esthetic' in written form. Entitled 'The Reappearance of Photography', this short piece has since attained classic status in American photography criticism, a consequence of Evans's incisive, unflinching commentary on his peers and his forbears. He discussed monographs on Eugene Atget and Edward Steichen, Renger-Patzsch's *Die Welt ist Schön*, August Sander's *Antlitz der Zeit*, Franz Roh's *Photo-Eye*, and a French collection entitled *Arts et Metiers Graphique*. He found in these publications the dominant tendencies of recent photography, and its refutation of 'that fantastic figure, the art photographer, really an unsuccessful painter with a bag of mysterious tricks'.¹²³ This figure proved remarkably resilient, and 'he is by no means a dead tradition even now, still gathered into clubs to exhibit pictures of misty October lanes, snow scenes, reflets dans l'eau, young girls with crystal balls'.¹²⁴ Such imagery was also the source of pique for Steiner, who in 1931 wrote in a rare review, of recent Pictorial work, bemoaning 'kittens in baskets, boat

¹²¹ Evans to Skolle, June 28 1929, Walker Evans Archive, 1994.260.25, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

¹²² Leslie Katz, 'An interview with Walker Evans', 1971, in Vicki Goldberg, ed., *Photography in Print*, University of New Mexico Press, 1981, p. 363.

¹²³ Walker Evans, 'The Reappearance of Photography', *Hound and Horn*, Vol. V, No. 1, October-December 1931, p.126.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

reflections, views through arched doorways, the little gray home in the West at the end of the Hogarth S curve road, and all those Art Study nudes with hoops'.¹²⁵

Evans opposed Atget (Fig. 107) to these tendencies, and positioned him as a pioneer now 'renoticed who stood away from this confusion'.¹²⁶ He judged in Atget's giant archive of Parisian scenes a uniquely poetic sensibility coupled with a disciplined, almost forensic technique. Evans was quite familiar with Atget's work, as he had been one of the first to view the large share of his legacy brought to America in 1929 by Berenice Abbott on Julien Levy's behest. Abbott had demanded that Levy purchase all the plates—about half—that she could salvage from his studio on his death in 1927, and penned the first, somewhat banal, American monograph on Atget for *Creative Art* in 1929. Evans photographed Abbott in early 1930 and often used her darkroom for his work. Evans and Abbott, who spent much of the 1930s documenting New York, were invariably cast as American followers of Atget. Evans found a haunting honesty in Atget's work, which was grossly absent in the work of Steichen, who was roundly damned as representing:

money, understanding of advertising, special feeling for parvenu elegance, slick technique, over all which is thrown a hardness and superficiality that is the hardness and superficiality of America's latter day, and has nothing to do with any person. The publication of this work carries an inverted interest as reflection of the Chrysler period.¹²⁷

Evans's extreme dislike of money was partly attributable to his short-lived career as a Wall Street clerk in 1929. On leaving one post, he wrote to Skolle: 'I am now free of Wall Street. Merci, Dieu. And I will never get into the money world again; or faintly near it'.¹²⁸ He would nevertheless work intermittently in the financial district until mid-1930. In 1971 he remembered that 'America was big business and I wanted to escape. It nauseated me. My photography was a semi-conscious reaction against right-thinking

¹²⁵ Ralph Steiner, 'The Pictorialist: From the Fourteenth Annual International Salon of Pictorial Photography under the Auspices of The Camera Pictorialist of Los Angeles', *Creative Art*, May 1931, p. 381.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 126.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, p.127.

¹²⁸ Evans to Skolle, April 16 1929, WEA, 1994.260.25.

and optimism; it was an attack on the establishment'.¹²⁹ Evans delighted in repeatedly hurling an ice pick at a photo of President Coolidge pinned to his door.¹³⁰

Yet if Evans was revolted by the amenability of Steichen's photography to advertising, then he also dismissed Renger-Patzsch's work for its blankly scientific nature. He saw it as a 'photomethod' that merely presented photography as a better way of recording the world than painting.¹³¹ If for Renger-Patzsch the world was beautiful, then in its editors of *Photo-Eye*, a companion to *Film und Foto*, 'call the world not only beautiful but exciting, cruel, and weird'.¹³² In this survey there was '...a photo of a corpse in a pool of blood *because you like nice things*'.¹³³ *Photo-Eye* was praised as an 'important and nervous book' and Evans quoted a large section of Roh's essay 'Mechanism and Expression', which had been printed previously in the *Film und Foto* catalogue.¹³⁴ Yet it was his assessment of *Antlitz der Zeit* (*Face of Our Time*) that was most revealing as Evans discussed Sander's 'type studies' (Fig. 108):

this is one of the futures of photography foretold by Atget. It is a photographic editing of society, a clinical process; even enough of a cultural necessity to make one wonder why other so-called advanced countries of the world have not been examined and recorded.¹³⁵

The review gives a strong indication of Evans's sources and his opinion of what photographic practice in America should aspire to and avoid. Art and commercial photography were dismissed. 'Documentary' modes were privileged, apart from those that merely fetishized objects. Yet his 'counter-aesthetic' was part of an intellectually inflected project, designed not merely to reflect society or point out pleasing facets but rather to find, as Atget had, a 'lyrical understanding' of it through extensive research into its dark and obscure corridors and corners.

¹²⁹ Katz, 'An Interview with Walker Evans', p. 361.

¹³⁰ Evans to Skolle August 14 1929, WEA, 1994.260.25.

¹³¹ Walker Evans, 'The Reappearance of Photography', p. 127.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid, p. 126

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid, p. 128.

Steiner provided Evans with an immediate, local project around which to orient his work. Steiner's informal tuition and loan of equipment would afford Evans the technical know-how as well as the imagery required to develop this new direction in his photography. Quite when and where Evans and Steiner met has not been recorded, but both exhibited at Lincoln Kirstein's Photography Exhibition of November 1930, which was based on the *Film und Foto* exhibition of the previous year. The majority of prints on display at Kirstein's show were, for logistical reasons, by American photographers. Alongside Evans and Steiner, these included Stieglitz, Strand, Sheeler, Bourke-White, Edward Weston, Berenice Abbott, and Sherril Schell. Foreign photographers, such as Moholy-Nagy, Cecil Beaton, and George Hoyningen-Heune, were represented through reproductions from magazines.¹³⁶ Kirstein's knowledge of *Film und Foto* was derived from Franz Roh's accompanying book *Photo-Auge*, as he acknowledged in his brief introduction to the catalogue, and he aped the former exhibition by including X-rays, aerial, astronomical and press photographs.¹³⁷ He also decried Pictorialism and emphasized the documentary qualities of photography in a manner that might have described Steiner and Evans's work:

photography exists in the contemporary consciousness of time, surprising the passing moment out of its context in flux, and holding it up to be regarded in the magic of its arrest. It has the curious vividness and unreality of street accidents, things seen from a passing train, and personal situations overheard or seen by choice—as one looks from a window of one skyscraper into the lighted room of another forty stories high and only across the street.¹³⁸

There were no skyscrapers in Evans and Steiner's photographs at the exhibition, although Evans's *S. S. Leviathan* and Steiner's *Poughkeepsie Bridge* (Fig. 109) were

¹³⁶ The exhibition consisted of 1-10 B. Abbott, 11-20 Eugene Atget, 21-30 Margaret Bourke-White, 31-40 Anton Bruehl, 41-50 Walker Evans, 51-60 A. Gerlach, 61-70 P. MacDonald, 71-73 William Rittase, 74-83 Charles Sheeler, 84-93 Sherril Schell, 94-103 Ralph Steiner, 104-113, Alfred Stieglitz, 114-121 P. Strand, 122-131 D. Ulmann, 132-140 Edward Weston, 141-145 Aerial, 146-150 Astronomical, 151-160 Press, 161-170 X-Ray.

¹³⁷ Lincoln Kirstein, 'Introductory Note', *Photography Exhibition*, Harvard Society of Contemporary Art, 1930, non-paginated.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*,

residues of their extensive forays into New Vision photography. Yet the presence of Steiner's *Wicker Chair*, later renamed *American Rural Baroque* by Kirstein, indicated the transitional nature of his work at this stage (Fig. 110).

In April 1931, Evans and Steiner, alongside Bourke-White, exhibited work at the John Becker Gallery, in a show entitled *Photographs by Three Americans*.¹³⁹ James Mellow wondered whether Evans approached Steiner after a stinging review by Agha dismissed Evans as one of 'these glorified reporters supremely indifferent to the technical side of their trade'.¹⁴⁰ Oddly, Agha's review was printed on the verso of the exhibition notice, and given his hostile tone this was a surprising publicity strategy. He rebuked Bourke-White, for example, as an 'industrial romantic', modern in subject but not in her 'personal attitude' which was 'sentimental'.¹⁴¹ Evans, 'one of the objectively recording photographers', was likened to 'the French photographic primitive' Atget: 'to both Evans and Atget "life is beautiful"—but Atget's vision of life was full of horse buggies, headless dressmakers' dummies and corset-shop windows; whereas Evans understands life in terms of street girders, luminous signs and Coney Island bathers'.¹⁴² The sense of uncanny that so marked Atget's work was thus rendered crass and crude in Evans. Agha reserved praise, however, for Steiner's most recent photographs:

a certain decorative and intellectual bitterness in Ralph Steiner's quaint Americana also has a literary flavor; but it is not the subject matter that makes his photographs modern. The purely photographic technique, the solid and unassuming compositions—and the exceptional quality of textures—make his photographs the expression of the same objective and architectural spirit which one feels in his mechanical and abstract films. This spirit is the very basis of the modern movement in the plastic arts.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ Steiner and Evans also illustrated Frank Lloyd Wright, 'The Tyranny of the Skyscraper', op. cit.

¹⁴⁰ M. F. Agha, 'Photography', *Photographs by Three Americans*, April 18 to May 8, 1931, John Becker Gallery: Margaret Bourke-White, Ralph Steiner, Walker Evans. Review printed on verso of exhibition notice.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

This judgement of bitterness was also evident in a letter that Evans wrote to Hanns Skolle in July 1931, which also partly explained the genesis of his relationship with Steiner. He wrote:

Ralph Steiner the photographer has turned out to be most generous, and has offered to teach me photography. He is a bitter little Jew, intelligent, whose limitations are skilfully blurred. Probably not clear about what he is doing (he can make money with tragic ease). I will let him work on me as much as he likes. He has made a few of the best street snapshots of people I have ever seen (Fig. 111), but doesn't show them. People greeting one another, showing off, et cet. Not enough done, though. Like all superior Jews, he has married an inferior Nordic who has pushed him in the wrong direction.¹⁴⁴

Firstly, the pronounced anti-Semitism in this passage is both disturbing and problematic. In the same letter Evans sounded off on H.G.Wells, whom he termed 'not a poet, not an artist, not an historian. Just a goddam little socialist'.¹⁴⁵ He went on: 'me, I am a Fascisti and I think the human race should be kicked around a great deal more than it is, and that I should do the kicking'.¹⁴⁶ Such reprehensible statements were not coupled with any actual engagement of fascist doctrines and one should be cautious not to take these diatribes as direct statements of political intent—Evans did not become a Nazi sympathiser of the stripe of Charles Lindbergh, Joseph Kennedy, Philip Johnson or Henry Ford. His racism must be seen as the juvenile, flippant game of a self-styled decadent, foolishly playing with dangerous currents of political thought, and revelling, with cruel, blasé humour, in supposed amorality. I shall return to this shortly.

Despite the ingratitude of Evans's note, his characterization of Steiner's photographic practice was in other respects trenchant. Steiner was portrayed as a photographer of exceptional merit, but one constantly hampered by lack of direction and poor choices. Certainly his street scenes chimed with Evans, whose favourable comments reflected a mutual interest in the fleeting vistas of street photography. But Steiner's commercial endeavours, blamed unfairly and incorrectly on Mary

¹⁴⁴ Walker Evans to Hans Skolle. July 4 1931, printed in Rosenheim and Eklund, eds., *Unclassified*, p. 154.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

Steiner—who was in any case about to leave Steiner for William Lescaze—are judged the key negative influence on his photography. Evans's own condemnation of commercial photography has already been discussed. It was, in any case, compromised by his continuous poverty and thus did not preclude him, aside from working periodically on Wall Street, from accepting any photographic commissions that came his way. Indeed, a rare experiment with multiple exposures, *The Big Night*, was actually produced for a trade journal entitled *Advertising and Selling*. However, Steiner was increasingly passing many of his commercial clients onto younger photographers, such as Willard van Dyke and Leo Hurwitz. By the time he met Evans, Steiner worked solely on the monthly *Ladies Home Journal* colour food photo, which took him only three days each month but brought in \$750, enough to sustain his nascent film experiments.

The extent of Steiner's tuition is unclear but what is crucial is that both photographers were by now producing images that were markedly different to the new photography of the previous decade. Questions of primacy and appropriation do little to explain the complex differences in Evans and Steiner's photographs. Yet it is notable that many of Evans's subjects, motifs, and techniques can be traced back to earlier photographs by Steiner. For example, Steiner's photographs of Victorian architecture in New York State and New England, such as his 1929 images of front porches in Saratoga Springs, were echoed in Evans's numerous, and better known series of 1931-1933 (Fig. 112 and Fig. 113). Charles Sheeler's numerous photographs of the exterior of an antique barn in Pennsylvania were possibly a precedent (Fig. 114). Yet these images evoke rather the austerity of Shaker furniture and the arid, precise surfaces of Sheeler's paintings. Evans and Steiner's parallel interest in arcane architecture was a response to both the subjects and techniques of New Vision photography.

By 1931 both Steiner and Evans had mostly abandoned the ubiquitous photographic trickery of the mid-Twenties—angle shots and aerial viewpoints became increasingly rare in their work, although, as we will see, the close-up was crucial in Evans's photography. As Agha noted in his short monographic essay, Steiner felt fatigued following a decade of what he termed 'standing on your head' photography.¹⁴⁷ Agha had

¹⁴⁷ M. F. Agha, 'Ralph Steiner', p. 37.

captured this dissatisfaction with the fashion for angular photography in a wry commentary from 1929:

modernistic photography is easily recognized by its subject matter: Eggs (any style) Twenty shoes, standing in a row. A skyscraper, taken from a modernistic angle*. Ten teacups standing in a row. A factory chimney seen through the ironwork of a railroad bridge (modernistic angle). The eye of a fly enlarged 2000 times. The eye of an elephant (same size). The interior of a watch. Three different heads of one lady superimposed. The interior of a garbage can. More eggs (modernistic angle).

*If no skyscraper is available, try the Eiffel Tower.¹⁴⁸

As evident in his comments on Steiner's work, Agha was not an anti-modernist but typified this sense that such imagery was exhausted. Paul A. Anderson's 'Modernistic Reactionaries', which was printed in *American Photography* in 1933, had a remarkably similar tone that also captured this disgruntlement with New Vision clichés. Anderson echoed Agha's parodic treatment with a consternated diatribe against photographs of:

human faces which resemble tanned pigskin; nude female figures distorted into meaningless and incredible poses; miscellaneous glassware and porcelain; portraits of eggs—was there anything more expressionless than an egg?—and studies of the viscera of alarm clocks. Fantastic reflections in curved mirrors; grotesque facial expressions; ladies cut into small bits and patched together again haphazard; worm's-eye views of helical stairways—all of this requires not thought, not ideas, not any originality whatever, but merely a fixed determination to do something different; not necessarily better—often only fantastic and silly—but at all events different. No intelligence is required to be abnormal—a congenital idiot is abnormal—but to be supernormal calls for every effort that we can put forth.¹⁴⁹

Anderson judged such work reactionary as it belonged to an obsolete art photography, and was more effectively rendered in other media. Yet whereas Agha made sport of photographic gimmickry whilst proffering contemporary alternatives, Anderson lionized the comforting photography of the pre-modernist epoch, finding New Vision work to be

¹⁴⁸ M. F. Agha, 'A Word on European Photography', *Pictorial Photography in America*, Vol. 5, 1929, cited in John Pultz and Catherine Scallen, eds., *Cubism and American Photography, 1910-1930*, Williamstown, Massachusetts: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1981, p. 60.

¹⁴⁹ Paul A. Anderson 'Modernistic Reactionaries', *American Photography*, January 1933, p. 34.

mired by the machine age. Nevertheless, Anderson's central point, that the ubiquitous photographic devices of the 1920s merely reflected the rampant commercialism of the era and the attendant eschewal of skill and craftsmanship was a consequence of a society commanded by cheap, yet persuasive advertising, might have resonated with Steiner and Evans, who would doubtless have rejected the inherent conservatism in evidence here.

Certainly, by the turn of the decade these photographic techniques had become commonplace. An article entitled 'Strange Angles of Our Familiar City: The Camera, Tilted to See the Towers, Finds in Them Fantastic Patterns of Our Age' in *The New York Times Magazine* in 1929 encapsulated the ubiquity of genre. The photographer was Sherril Schell, a veteran Pictorialist who up until the late 1920s had produced misty scenes of oriental bazaars etc, and who was now turning his camera at a sharp angle to the city's skyscrapers. Although Schell produced some startling images (Fig. 115), H. I. Brock's text epitomized the hackneyed 'poetic' evocation of the city as a tapestry of unusual patterns:

treat the power plant of Manhattan with a bath of sunlight, and the visual impression resolves itself into designs not ill-matched with the designs which the artists of this school have crystallized out of the solutions of the same raw material in the acid of the artist's instinct for decoration.... The patterns in the accompanying photographs, and in others shot at unscrupulous angles by Sherril Schell, are just such patterns as we have got used to seeing displayed upon fabrics—silks for ladies' fine wear and hangings for beautiful drawing rooms and boudoirs.¹⁵⁰

In contrast, Steiner and Evans now only photographed skyscrapers and bridges for commercial projects. Their focus on indigenous Victorian architecture should be seen as partial critical responses to the golden age of American capitalism, and its implosion in 1929. A contemporary, but distinct, critique of American capitalism can be found in the writings of the Stieglitz circle. Wanda Corn writes that here certain code words, such as 'Spirit', 'Soil', and 'American' permeated the writings of Paul Rosenfeld, Waldo Frank, and Stieglitz himself.¹⁵¹ A certain trajectory towards cultural

¹⁵⁰ H. I. Brock, 'Strange Angles of Our Familiar City: The Camera, Tilted to See the Towers, Finds in Them Fantastic Patterns of Our Age', *The New York Times Magazine*, 16 June 1929, pp. 8-9.

¹⁵¹ Corn, *The Great American Thing*, p. 31.

nationalism is evident in Stieglitz's eschewal of European art around 1917 and foundation of the gallery An American Place in 1929. It culminated in the 1934 volume *America and Alfred Stieglitz: A Collective Portrait* where a host of artists and writers, from Lewis Mumford to Gertrude Stein, paid tribute. Dorothy Norman's dutiful account of Stieglitz describes a 'prophet' who viewed America as 'like a parent filled with love for his child, relentlessly criticizing'.¹⁵² Much of this critique was directed at the city, industry, and technology—Stieglitz reserved particular hatred for the Ford car.¹⁵³

It is surprising, then, that at precisely the moment Steiner and Evans were abandoning the ubiquitous skyscraper imagery, Stieglitz joined the fray with a series of skyscraper representations—elegant studies of New York, mostly taken from his rooms on the thirtieth floor of the Shelton Hotel and the windows of An American Place. Between 1930 and 1937, he produced around ninety photographs of New York, although the majority stemmed from circa 1931, hence the title 'New York-1931' for this section of the 1932 exhibition '127 Photographs (1892-1932) by Alfred Stieglitz', which was held at An American Place. In contrast to the earlier photogravures of skyscrapers, these were the sharp and clear gelatine silver prints he had been using since the late 1910s, and that were favoured by Steiner, Evans et al. Yet Stieglitz's modus operandi diverged from his peers. Instead of representing the dramatically changing city through the dynamic distortions of New Vision photography, Stieglitz's vista is stately and measured, its orthogonal perspective analogous to the grids of the city itself. These photographs were titled *From My Window at the Shelton, North*, or *From My Window at an American Place, Southwest* (Fig. 116 and Fig. 117), with variations depending on viewpoint and direction viewed, like mapped coordinates documented in a journal, rather identifying which building was shown, as Steiner had done. The skyscrapers, which were rarely shown whole, were therefore equivalent to one another, like clouds or body parts, and appear as stage sets for the dramatic variations in light captured by Stieglitz, at various points in his daily routines. These images function as units of a

¹⁵² Dorothy Norman, 'An American Place', in Waldo Frank, Lewis Mumford, Dorothy Norman, Paul Rosenfeld, and Harold Rugg, eds., *America and Alfred Stieglitz: A Collective Portrait*, New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1934, p. 140.

¹⁵³ Corn, *The Great American Thing*, p. 34.

series, inflecting on and enhancing one another through their equivalence, dissolving the specificity of the skyscrapers by framing fragments of buildings together in a sequence.

Jay Bochner writes that ‘they speak of Stieglitz’s desire to return to a cultural battle, one exacerbated by the high contrast of profligate skyscrapers to deep economic depression, and that they represent a change of heart about going out peacefully’.¹⁵⁴ For Bochner, the Depression is registered in the *From My Window at an American, Place, Southwest* sequence, where the cracked render of the older building is juxtaposed with an extended chunk of the Rockefeller Centre. Yet these photographs seem more like an update of an older theme, exemplified by *Old and New New York* of 1910 (Fig. 118). Bochner argues that these photographs capture Stieglitz’s revolt against ‘commercial America’, and he finds in them significant negativity, their emptiness signifying ‘labor as the absence of labor’.¹⁵⁵ Rather, these meditations on the unceasing city were defined by their equivalence, which serves to mask the divisions in the world below, from which this lofty viewpoint is itself divided—in the twin sanctuaries of *An American Place* and the Shelton, Stieglitz hovered above the hungry streets like a cloud.

Steiner and Evans should also be distinguished from the Regionalist painters Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton, and more virulent nationalists such as the critics Thomas Craven and Royal Cortissoz. For Steiner and Evans the focus on regional architecture was neither especially celebratory nor exclusive, as both continued to photograph the city and engaged in an array of commissioned work. Neither was there any evidence that were they especially patriotic. A more appropriate discourse on America might be found in the 1932 *America as Americans See It*, edited by Fred Ringel and conceived as a document for a European audience. Evans’s *42nd Street* (Fig. 119) was chosen as the frontispiece for this collection, which was more ambivalent, less eulogistic, than the Stieglitz tome. Essays ranged from studies by the black scholars W. E. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson to ruminations on skyscrapers and the machine by the architect Harvey Wiley Corbett and the popular economist Stuart Chase. The attempt here was to provide a document of America—the acuity of the volume ensured

¹⁵⁴ Jay Bochner, *An American Lens: Scenes from Alfred Stieglitz’s New York Secession*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2005, p. 295.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

only by the presentation of competing claims. In contrast to Du Bois's eloquent study of 'Black America', the writer Elmer Davis's 'The American at Leisure' argued 'Negroes in the Southern country districts can make of indolence an art that is beyond the capacity of the Anglo-Saxon'.¹⁵⁶ Steiner's *American Rural Baroque* accompanied this essay, indicating merely that the photograph illustrated the theme of 'leisure' rather than any ideological sympathies with such indolent homespun logic.

Some of the essays in *America as Americans See It* made reference to the Depression. Chase wrote that 'American industry at the present writing [October, 1931] is suffering from a severe attack of nervous prostration, with the doctors in violent disagreement as to the exact date upon which the patient may be expected to recover'.¹⁵⁷ The novelist Upton Sinclair proffered a cure, 'America has to choose, as does all the rest of the world; either we must socialize our industrial system, or let the Fascists take control of government, and make it a branch of big business and high finance'.¹⁵⁸ Sinclair's rallying call was part of a dramatic upsurge of socialist critique in cultural circles as a response to the Depression. Steiner and Evans answered the call in different ways.

Evans's portrait of Steiner as an affluent commercial photographer was less than complete. After all, in 1931 Steiner was also giving lessons to Leo Hurwitz and Leo Seltzer at the New York Workers Film and Photo League (WFPL). Steiner had joined the League in time to photograph the May Day demonstration of 1931.¹⁵⁹ The origin of his interest in Left wing politics is unclear. *New Masses* reproduced *Mexico in Revolution* (Fig. 120) in April 1929, yet the specific reference to politics in this photograph is almost unique.¹⁶⁰ Payne argues convincingly that *Self-Portrait with Billboards* (Fig. 121) represented Steiner's ironic self-identification with his advertising

¹⁵⁶ Elmer Davis, 'The American at Leisure', in Fred J. Ringel, ed., *America as Americans See It*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1932, p. 181.

¹⁵⁷ Stuart Chase, 'The Heart of American Industry' in *ibid*, p. 20.

¹⁵⁸ Upton Sinclair, 'Graft in America' in *ibid*, p. 180.

¹⁵⁹ William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film From 1931 to 1942*, Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 15.

¹⁶⁰ It presumably referred to an article by Carl Ramburg on 'Mexico in Revolution' in the same issue, *New Masses*, April 1929, p. 11.

work.¹⁶¹ It is also arguable that his series of photographs of the machine artists Lozowick and Henry Billings in situ restored social relations to the machine aesthetic but also satirized machine art, gently mocking both his own and their work (Fig. 122).

As William Alexander records, Steiner's politics, such as they can be ascertained, did not go much beyond liberal reformism despite the clear Communist orientation of the League.¹⁶² His primary political motivation for joining was doubtless anger at the privations of the Depression itself, and his knowledge of socialist critical discourse was probably limited.¹⁶³ The WFPL was closely tied to the Communist Party of the United States of America, and it was modelled on the *Vereinigung der Arbeiterfotografen Deutschlands* (Association of German Worker Photographers). Both organizations were sponsored by the *Internationale Arbeiterhilfe* (Workers' International Relief), a Communist organization that was itself part of the Comintern.¹⁶⁴ The WFPL was essentially a combination of the Japanese Workers' Camera Club with a group of film writers and filmmakers.¹⁶⁵ It was founded to instruct unemployed workers in photographic techniques so that photography would be a weapon against injustice. In their photographs aesthetic niceties were necessarily sacrificed for an emotive and attention-grabbing activist photography (Fig. 123) with its own hard-nosed aesthetic. Many of the surviving photographs were taken by Seltzer, who captured mass

¹⁶¹ Payne, 'Ralph Steiner', p.167.

¹⁶² Alexander, *Film on the Left*, p. 13.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Leah Ollman, 'The Photo League's Forgotten Past', *History of Photography*, Summer 1994, p.156.

¹⁶⁵ The Japanese Workers' Camera Club, founded 1925, numbered around 50 members, and was organized by F. Kitamura and Y. Chiba, at the Japanese Art Center on East 14th Street. They held two exhibitions annually. At the Fourth Annual Photo Exhibit of the Japanese Workers Camera Club, from December 1929 to February 1930, included Californian and other New York camera clubs. There were scenes of 'May Day, demonstrations of food workers, labourers at construction work, a shoemaker at work, a factory, fishermen, etc' with titles such as 'Exploitation' and 'Red Day'. Francis Strauss, 'Workers' Photo Exhibit', *New Masses*, February 1930, p.20. By July 1930, the JWCC had been amalgamated into the Labour Defender Photo Group, which had also taken over the East 14 St headquarters. Isabelle A. Kleinman, 'Worker-Photographers', *New Masses*, July 1930, p. 21, and 'Worker-Photographers', *New Masses*, November 1930, p. 20. In early 1931 the LDPG was absorbed into to the WFPL, although the original Japanese photographers seem to have been inactive at this stage.

demonstrations and brutal police responses from the perspective of the worker in the middle of the crowd, unlike the press photographers who generally observed events from behind police lines. One League film contains press footage of Seltzer being arrested by the police. Seltzer's *Rent Strike, Upper East Side, New York City* (Fig. 124) exemplifies WFPL photography at its most effective. The sharp framing of the shot coupled with the heavy line of crude ornamental masonry concentrate the main focal point, the banner which proclaims a direct political message, 'STRIKE!! AGAINST HIGH RENT', whilst above the banner a dark-skinned working class woman leans, seemingly pleading, from her apartment window.

In contrast, Steiner's role in the WFPL was as a teacher and technician. He produced few photographs for the organization, concentrating increasingly on filmmaking.¹⁶⁶ A further example of Steiner's increasing participation in radical cultural groups was his involvement with the Group Theatre. As stated in the previous chapter, Steiner produced several images of plays and personages at the theatre in the early 1930s.¹⁶⁷ As the photographs are either portraits or figure studies, they differ greatly to the main body of work from the 1920s, but share a certain comic lyricism. Steiner apparently produced no such record of the WFPL.

As we have seen, Evans's politics were a curious affair. He had no specific affiliations, despite his apparent endorsement of Fascism. In the early 1930s Evans was a close personal friend of important figures in Left cultural circles, such as the artist and photographer Ben Shahn and the photographer and filmmaker Jay Leyda. Leyda, Steiner's former darkroom assistant, and Evans would share 'disappointment in but respect for Steiner'.¹⁶⁸ Evans was thus anecdotally rather than organizationally linked to the Left cultural sphere that Steiner was active in from 1931. As many of the

¹⁶⁶ Steiner made three films before joining the League—*H2O* (1929), *Surf and Seaweed* (1930), and *Mechanical Elements* (1931). His films with the League and latterly Frontier Films included *Pie in the Sky* and *Café Universal* of 1934. He was cameraman, alongside Paul Strand, on *The Plough that Broke the Plains* in 1936.

¹⁶⁷ Two of these, *The Coachman* and *Toulouse-Lautrec*, were published in *Theatre Arts Monthly*, October 1932, pp. 819-820; a further thirteen were reproduced as Ralph Steiner, 'Portfolio of Photographs', *Educational Theatre Journal*, December 1976, pp. 462-470.

¹⁶⁸ Walker Evans, cited in James Mellow, *Walker Evans*. New York: Basic Books, 1994, p. 207.

protagonists were Jewish, Evans's occasional anti-Semitic remarks, though made privately, set him apart?¹⁶⁹ Yet his anti-Semitism was well within the bounds of deliberately tasteless humour. After all Evans wept at the bedside of the dying Potamkin, a Jewish Marxist, during a failed bid to prolong his life via a blood transfusion.¹⁷⁰ Evans's politics were undefined, and are best summed in a diary entry of 1933: 'Hell with liberals, intellectuals, artists, communists. Human society is a failure'¹⁷¹.

In a 1933 letter to Leyda he had complained that 'the Film and Photo League bustles, but sadly enough I got angry with them because they used my name as sponsor after I had declined the honor with reasons. Very foolish of them to antagonize that way'.¹⁷² Evans hovered on the edge of this political world, non-committal yet nonetheless compelled.¹⁷³ His photographs of communists at a summer picnic seem to capture this mixture of attraction and antipathy, as to the amusement of Mellow he 'cast a cold eye on the anticapitalist lemmings sunbathing on the lawns of Camp Nitgedaiget'.¹⁷⁴ In 1934, Evans was hired to provide a series of photographs (Fig. 125) for a piece for *Fortune* penned by the Leftist critic Dwight MacDonald, a historical survey of the Party replete with reproductions of pamphlet covers, press portraits of the leaders, and even a score for *L'Internationale*.¹⁷⁵ MacDonald, himself a party member at that time, produced an informative, enthusiastic account, but was privately 'disgusted' by this gathering, finding relief from the 'squirmying mass' of unclean bodies by

¹⁶⁹ Other notable Jewish Marxists included Meyer Schapiro, Harry Alan Potamkin, Mike Gold, Louis Lozowick, and Joseph Freeman.

¹⁷⁰ Walker Evans Diary July 19th 1933, Mellow, p. 208.

¹⁷¹ Walker Evans Diary July 16th 1933, *ibid*.

¹⁷² Walker Evans to Jay Leyda, 22 November 1933, JLP, Box 3 Folder 33.

¹⁷³ Evans's comments on Soviet Russia were minimal. In his 1937 list of likes and dislikes he included as dislikes Trotsky and Stalin, as well as Marx, the Group Theatre, 'the face of Max Eastman', and the *New Republic*. Nevertheless, a tantalising nugget exists in the Walker Evans Archive, which concerns a list of photographs, which were apparently given to Walter Goldwater, a New York bookseller, to take to Moscow in 1930. As Rosenheim and Eklund point out, the destination of these photographs is unknown, let alone whether or not Goldwater actually took the photographs to Russia. Rosenheim and Eklund, eds., *Unclassified*, pp. 72-77, and pp. 172-3.

¹⁷⁴ Mellow, *Walker Evans*, p. 226.

¹⁷⁵ 'The Communist Party', *Fortune*, September 1934.

escaping to a Westchester Hotel and its 'clean capitalistic pool'.¹⁷⁶ This description, in a private letter, veered markedly close to Cummings's sneering at the Soviets (see Conclusion), yet crucially MacDonald chastised his own 'aristocratic leanings' and was clearly ashamed of his discomfort with the '99 and 44/100% pure Yiddish' communists, remarking that 'the weekend at Nitgedaiget came near to making a fascist out of me'.¹⁷⁷ Evans's photographs seem very far removed from Rodchenko's numerous scenes of athletic workers training for a healthy new society. Here the perspiring communists are depicted as overcome by intense heat, a fleshy throng wallowing under the sweltering sun, yet have a humanity lacking in MacDonald's comments. They are nonetheless different and distant, and their otherness makes them appear like the typological specimens of August Sander's studies.

Steiner and Evans therefore responded to the massive politicization of cultural practices during the Depression in differing ways, yet neither was programmatic in his photographic work—there are few images that can be taken as straightforward polemical critiques. The photographs were documents of a sort, but should be differentiated from the tradition of 'documentary photography', which included Riis and Dorothea Lange, that Evans is often identified with. Of course, Evans later joined the Farm Security Administration's photography programmes, an uneasy period punctuated by regular spats with his boss Roy Stryker, and subsequently travelled with James Agee to Hale County, Alabama, producing the photographs to accompany Agee's brimming account of the dispossessed poor, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). Like Steiner's explicitly political films, both projects lie outside of the scope of this paper. The concern here is with photographs that deflect obvious ideological interpretations, but might function as analogues to the contemporary political turmoil. Ultimately, the notion of 'documentary', as in Martha Rosler's characterization of liberal reformist documentary tradition of 'meliorism' of Riis, Hine, and Lange seems inadequate to describe these earlier photographs, which were not focused on the suffering of the

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 225 and Dwight MacDonald to N. Rodman, July 16 1934, in Michael Wreszin, ed., *A Moral Temper: The Letters of Dwight MacDonald*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001, pp. 48-9.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

starving¹⁷⁸. Furthermore, she wrongly includes the revolutionary WFPL in her list and ahistorically attributes them 'the muted rhetoric of the Popular Front'.¹⁷⁹

One might consider some photographs that do not so much assert a critical function as focus on facets of arcane American imagery with a bitter, though oblique, satirical humour. Steiner and Evans's photographs convey an 'American uncanny', distinct historically from photography associated with European Surrealism though analogous in terms of a mutual fascination with the camera's ability to capture the extraordinary within the banal. For instance, Steiner's *American Rural Baroque* (Fig. 110) might be read as a prosaic, even sentimental, homage to rustic tranquillity. Yet it is pertinent that the composition cleverly plays the jagged angularity of the porch, pillar, clapboards, and shutters against the coils and curves of the chair. The empty chair has an uncanny quality, a disquieting stillness, also evident in the abstracted anthropomorphic shadow on the wall, where the spiralling wicker motifs are transformed into the many curious eyes of a comical cubistic monster.

In imagining an 'American uncanny', it is necessary to contrast these photographs with so-called 'Surrealist photography'. This loose area of practice drew in photographers, such as Man Ray, Jacques-André Boiffard, Eli Lotar, Brassai, Maurice Tabard, and Raoul Ubac (Fig. 126 and Fig. 127), who were either members or associates of the Surrealist Movement. Like Surrealist painting, there was no stylistic or technical unity to their work, but there was a common investigation of photography's ability to produce unsettling abstractions and juxtapositions of familiar objects or everyday scenes. For Rosalind Krauss, 'straight photography' was one technique amongst many, including negative prints, photograms, photomontage, photo collage, 'cliché verre', and solarization.¹⁸⁰ Barely addressing 'straight' images, judged merely to resemble 'Neue Sachlichkeit' or Bauhaus photography, Krauss's discussion was almost entirely concerned with manipulated images. This was because:

¹⁷⁸ Martha Rosler, 'In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)', in R. Bolton, ed., *The Contest of Meaning*, p. 303.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, pp. 304-6.

¹⁸⁰ Rosalind Krauss, 'Photography in the Service of Surrealism', in Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, *L'Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism*, New York: Abbeville Publishers, 1985, pp. 24-5.

surreality *is*, we could say, nature convulsed into a kind of writing. The special access that photography, as a medium, has to this experience is photography's privileged connection to the real. The manipulations available to photography—what we have been calling doubling and spacing as well as a technique of representational reduplication, or structure *en abyme*—appear to document these convulsions.¹⁸¹

'Straight' photography was able to register the visualization of automatism, yet manipulated imagery seemed more effective in breaking, as she quotes Ubac, the 'rationalist arrogance' of photography to achieve the 'poetic movement of liberation'.¹⁸²

In opposition, Ian Walker finds this perpetuation of the palpable bisection of photography into 'straight' and manipulated images to be 'a very American position', a binary spearheaded by the MoMA Director of Photography John Szarkowski, and consequently *L'Amour fou* 'failed to represent a whole other way of working with the medium: a Surrealist photography which, on the contrary, exploits its very "straightness", its apparent Realism, to Surrealist ends'.¹⁸³ If 'Surrealist photography' remains an unstable category, then those French photographers following the example of Atget developed an area of photography analogous to Steiner and Evans's work. Walker discusses 'a photography that largely takes place in and around the city, where the banal and the marvellous coexist on a daily basis'.¹⁸⁴ Its surreality lay partly in the invocation of the uncanny, but more exactly in the association of the photographers with the Surrealist movement and the publication of this work (and that of Atget and countless 'found' photographs) in magazines, such as *Minotaure* and *La Révolution surréaliste*, and books, such as André Breton's 1928 *Nadja* (Fig. 128). It was therefore in the editorial selection for Surrealist publications that the photographs, a vast range of photographs from auteur to anonymous bound by a perceived uncanny quality, became Surrealist, hence Atget's status, like that of Giorgio de Chirico, as a 'proto-surrealist'.

Evans and the Surrealists' contemporary interest in photography as a medium for producing uncanny imagery was a coincidence attributable to their mutual interest in

¹⁸¹ Ibid, p. 35.

¹⁸² Ibid, p. 24.

¹⁸³ Ian Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris*, Manchester University Press, 2002, p. 3.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 3.

Atget's resonant documents. Indeed, Evans included Surrealism, alongside Marx, Trotsky, Stalin, and Julien Levy, in a 1937 list of dislikes (likes included 'fucking', 'drinking', James Joyce, and bizarrely Lenin).¹⁸⁵ Steiner's engagement with Surrealism was even more indeterminate, although he was briefly acquainted with Cartier-Bresson when the latter visited New York in the late 1920s.¹⁸⁶ A rare dabbling with 'surrealistic' imagery, *Nude and Mannequin* (Fig. 129), was apparently an embarrassment for all concerned, and was never repeated.¹⁸⁷ One image of 1922 resembles Atget's work (Fig. 130), although it was probably an accident as Atget was unknown in America before 1928. Steiner was more likely experimenting with the camera's ability to make strange, without manipulation or angular distortion, in a way that Atget had pioneered, and that Evans, the Surrealists, and Steiner himself would later pursue.

Walker writes that the uncanny resides in the indexicality of the photograph, as 'indexicality not only underlies our sense of photography's realism; it is also responsible for our sense that we are seeing an uncanny process at work—an image that has "made itself", the transmutation of a thing directly into its image, an image that in some way transcends the thing'.¹⁸⁸ He quotes Breton's argument that automatic writing was 'the veritable photography of thought' and his conception of the camera as a 'blind instrument', a mindless machine for looking.¹⁸⁹ Yet the indexical nature of photography also bound the photograph to its material location, and its place of production was more potent in 'straight' photography than the manipulated image, where distorted or multiple points of origin tampered with or masked the index. For Walker, Surrealist photography was an index of the disquieting prosaic marvels of Parisian streets.

In Steiner and Evans's work, meanwhile, the switch from the vertiginous New Vision photography, that was an analogue of Amerikanismus and Amerikanizm, to impassive and strange orthogonal portraits of Americana, reflecting an Americanism of

¹⁸⁵ Walker Evans, 'Contempt or Hatred For', unpublished note dated 26 December 1937, printed in Rosenheim and Eklund, eds., *Unclassified*, pp. 75-77.

¹⁸⁶ Steiner, *A Point of View*, p. 9, and Steiner, 'Correspondence', *Camera Arts*, March/April 1982, p. 8.

¹⁸⁷ Joel Zucker, *Ralph Steiner: Filmmaker and Still Photographer*, New York: Arno Press, 1978, p. 84.

¹⁸⁸ Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams*, p. 11.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p. 12.

resistance, rather than idealization, indicated a shift from the semantically open machine aesthetic to a more determinate indexicality. At stake was a discarded, repressed America, a cipher of the unfolding Depression, and the new work invoked a local politically charged ‘American uncanny’. The uncanny was arguably latent in Steiner’s work since the early 1920s—his machine aesthetic was predicated on perceiving the strangeness of modernity—yet was too confused, diffuse and intuitive to be understood as a project. Steiner’s gradual abandonment of photography for film was a slow process that predated the Depression, but it is notable that during his time with the WFPL he seemed unwilling or unable to match his politics with photographic work, concentrating instead on teaching and making films.

As Agha put it, Steiner ‘does not object when connoisseurs classify these photographs together with some of the best satirical Americana, but to him they are only the expiatory devotions for the sin of having stood on his head’.¹⁹⁰ As I have pointed out, his occasional photographs of Victorian houses recurred in Evans’s extensive project. Kirstein, who accompanied Evans on many of his expeditions, noted how:

Walker Evans’s photographs are such perfect documents that their excellence is not assertive. In his series of American Federal and Victorian architecture, taken over the last four years, he is providing illustrations for a monumental history of the American art of building in its most imaginative and impermanent period. These wooden houses disintegrate, almost, between snaps of the lens. Many shown in these photographs no longer stand.¹⁹¹

The assertion of a crumbling, perishing America of the recent past was also evident in a *Fortune* article of May 1930 on ‘Vanishing Backyards’, which was illustrated with paintings by Charles Burchfield and photographs by Steiner, including *American Rural Baroque*. Steiner and Burchfield had ‘assembled a record—not of the new America, which remains unregenerate, its back porches and backyards, its ugliness and its

¹⁹⁰ Agha, ‘Ralph Steiner’, p. 37.

¹⁹¹ Lincoln Kirstein, ‘Walker Evans’s Photographs of Victorian Architecture’, *Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*, December 1933, p. 4.

waste'.¹⁹² This was a catalogue of disappearing familiar scenes, but also an insight into the nature of ephemera in machine age America:

such a portrait America can afford, yet this is a record of things which are passing. Some, like the rocking chair, the curious architecture of the small town, give way to new, modern, and possibly improved schools of taste. Others, like the absurd, hideous posters which are plastered across the country, like the tree-choppers denuding a street in the name of boulevard lights, give way to more general agreement as to what constitutes progress. Still others—the streets of mud and the littered fringes of the cities will move farther and farther into the hinterland until finally they disappear.¹⁹³

Benjamin discussed how Surrealism had divined political potency in the residues of a recent past:

[Breton] can boast an extraordinary discovery. He was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the “outmoded”, in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them.¹⁹⁴

In considering ‘the relation of these things to revolution’, Benjamin applauded the Surrealists for fathoming that ‘destitution—not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects—can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism’.¹⁹⁵

Images of destitution permeated Evans’s photography. From a quality he had identified in Steiner’s work, Evans developed a project, which was independent from yet engaged with revolutionary political formations. A case in point was his series of photographs taken to illustrate the left wing expert on South and Central America Carleton Beals’s 1933 *The Crime of Cuba* (Fig. 131). Evans did not read the book before travelling to Cuba, and produced photographs that did not simply illuminate the poverty there, but by focusing his counter-aesthetic on extraordinary scenes in the

¹⁹² ‘Vanishing Backyards’, *Fortune*, May 1930, p. 79.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Walter Benjamin, ‘Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’, 1929, trans. E. Jephcott and K. Shorter, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, London: NLB, 1979, p. 229.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

streets of Havana nonetheless resonated with Beals' tirade against the oppression, privations and strife on the island. Yet even in this context, the photographs were not literally accusatory.

Steiner's 1929 *Trash* (Fig. 132), also known as *Winter Garden Now*, could be read as a wry commentary on consumerism—an equation of cheap movies with trash. Yesterday's movie posters lie scrunched up amidst the general debris, beneath a current poster featuring a stylized rendering of a typical bronzed manly hero defiantly protecting a terrified, clinging damsel from some unspeakable adversity. This is a world of novelty culture, an assembly line product of a film sold by the new technology of 'sound', destined to join its predecessors amidst the detritus. There is an added, but obviously, unintentional punning of the film title *Noah's Ark*—the deluge that cleansed the world—with the theatre notice for *Journey's End*, the harrowing, poignant saga set in the wasteland of the Great War, a war once considered by some artists as a purgative. Steiner's photograph, as the legend suggests, is 'one talking picture'.

Evans's *Torn Movie Poster* (Fig. 133), of 1931, by contrast, is closely cropped and thereby denies the contextual juxtapositions, evident in Steiner's image. Again a couple typical of thousands of cheap movies of the time huddle in the face of imminent danger. The calm unruffled hero and, once again, the terrified heroine are here chopped brutally from their environment. The man's face is sheared neatly by the edge of the image and the typeface. The woman's face has been gouged as the poster has been rent, resembling some horrific wounding further implied by the warping of the paper through rain soaking, which gives the effect of blood flow. This savage defacement echoes the dreadful awe on her face. If this is some critique of the ubiquity of popular culture, then it is at best an ambiguous, disenchanted, and not wholly convincing one. Rather, it evokes a dark, sadistic—even misogynistic—humour, a delight in the way erosion has produced a horrible image to accompany the ludicrous bogus terror on the protagonists. Whereas cheap movies and trash appear as analogies in Steiner's photograph, decay and deterioration are ingrained here, at the core of the image. Where Steiner made connections, Evans focused brutally on the unitary.

Evans's *Fire Ruin in Ossining* of 1930 (Fig. 134) is an image of devastation. The corner of what was once the interior of a house is now partially overgrown, and is well

lit by daylight flooding through the broken roof. The remnants of panelling, plaster, and timber are richly textured, defined in sharp light, and contrasted with the encroaching foliage. In the same year, Evans photographed a pair of tin ceiling decorations, which he had recovered from builder's debris during roof repairs to his apartment block.¹⁹⁶ These buckled and broken soffits, artefacts of Victorian aspirations to status, appear tragically ridiculous. In *Stamped Tin Relic* (Fig. 135), the ersatz Greek column lies crushed and warped; its Ionian affectation seemingly stomped by a heavy boot. In *Tin Relic* (Fig. 136) of 1930 the gesture towards delicacy, evident particularly in the metal rose, exposes the crude, formulaic process of fabrication. This industrially produced home decoration is shorn into a stark close-up by Evans's trademark close cropping. This serves to disassociate the object, underlining the object's uncanny quality. The predominant forms of the metal arc and the flower suggest a camera—through the mechanical vision of photography we see a tarnished metal eye staring back at us.

These were images of an antiquated America, of an early phase of the Machine Age photographed at the moment of its seeming disintegration. These photographs do not simply express a Leftist 'critical visual ideology' of the Depression Era, antithetical to a 'capitalist ideology', but were multi-accentual signs of resistance within a damaged nation. This photography was not therefore available for propaganda in the usual sense. John Tagg writes, concerning Evans's work, that 'we encounter an attachment to the object that does not accommodate itself to instrumental communication, but is encrypted, locked away in layers of representation like an infinite series of Russian dolls'.¹⁹⁷ Neither was this a case of Modernism supplanted by 'social documentary', but, with its residual abstractions, sharp contrasts, and palpable strangeness, this photography was a permutation of Modernism, interested if not instrumental, that sought out the fissures of American life. Corroded and isolated, the broken and displaced relics in these photographs evoke an America far from the dizzying valleys of skyscrapers and the sublime cathedrals of industry.

¹⁹⁶ Mellow, *Walker Evans*, op.cit, p. 127.

¹⁹⁷ John Tagg, 'Melancholy Realism: Walker Evans's Resistance to Meaning'. *Narrative*, January 2003, p. 73.

CHAPTER FOUR

Amerikino: Montage and the Machine in American Experimental Cinema.

I am the Cine-Eye. I am the mechanical eye. I the machine show you the world as only I can see it.

Dziga Vertov, 1923.¹

Edward Weston's blunt rejection of the photomontages on display at the Stuttgart Film und Foto exhibition—'It begs the question, why?'—was discussed in the previous chapter. Recently, Sally Stein has attempted to solve the mystery of the near absence of photomontage in America in the interwar period. Whilst plentiful in advertising and publishing, photomontage was seldom used by still photographers or artists, either as an aesthetic or political strategy.² Stein justly considers Hugo Gellert's 'What's it All About?' (Fig. 137) from the July 1928 issue of *New Masses*, as 'an obvious first experiment in which the American ingredients are overpowered by a foreign recipe'.³ Sifting through such scattered artefacts, she concludes vaguely that the eschewal of photomontage was due to differing perceptions of spatial dynamics in Europe and America. Imagining a 'correspondence between the American cult of the straight photograph and a rather nostalgic, agrarian view of private property and bourgeois individualism', she writes that:

¹ Dziga Vertov, 'The Cine Eyes: A Revolution', *Lef*, No. 3, June/ July 1923, in Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, eds., *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*, trans. Richard Taylor, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988, p. 93.

² An almost isolated instance of photomontage on public display was the 1932 Murals by American Painters and Photographers exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, which featured blown up photomontages by Berenice Abbott, Charles Sheeler, Thurman Rotan and George Platt Lynes.

³ Sally Stein, ' "Good fences make good neighbours": American Resistance to Photomontage Between the Wars', in Matthew Teitelbaum, ed., *Montage and Modern Life, 1919-1942*, ex. cat., Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1992, p. 135.

by the twentieth century, the two-dimensional matrix could barely indicate the dense vertical development of metropolitan centers—one reason why Europeans frequently adopted montage to signify urbanism. But in a country where physical expansiveness still served as an enduring source of national pride—where, consequently, the plight of destitute farmers was far more common a visual symbol of national crisis than the plight of industrial workers—the unaltered, “natural” rectilinear photograph presented in and set off by the orderly structure of the grid graphically articulated the space and strength of liberal individualism.⁴

Whilst the American straight image represented an ordered American ‘mindset’, European photomontage evinced dynamism and fragmentation. Of course, Stein’s binary evades the jagged angularity of photographs by Steiner, Sheeler, et al, and their similarity to straight photographs by Moholy-Nagy and Rodchenko. More importantly, straight photography and montage were not opposed in the context of experimental cinema in America, an area that Stein does not consider. Indeed, for the editors of *Experimental Cinema* and the filmmakers of the Workers Film and Photo League (hereafter WFPL), cinematic montage was synonymous with the dynamism of Socialism, and the films produced by this coterie were montages of straight cinematographic shots.

In 1930, Seymour Stern wrote in *Experimental Cinema* that Soviet cinematic montage was moving ‘into a domain of abstract cinematography which will lead the film to the door of mind and fourth-dimensional representation’.⁵ However, he argued that this mythic form of abstraction should not:

be confused with the “abstract” cinematography of the French cinema—that is, with technical laboratory exercises, however important from certain points of view, such as *Rien Que Les Heures*, *Ballet Mécanique*, *A Quoi Revent Les Jeunes Films*, etc. The abstract film, according to my ideology, belongs outside the working-sphere proper of mass-cinematography and can be of value only to limited groups of students who need cinematic “piano practice”.⁶

⁴ Ibid, p. 189.

⁵ Seymour Stern, ‘Principles of the New World-Cinema’, *Experimental Cinema*, February 1930, p. 16.

⁶ Ibid.

Stern's distinction of worthwhile Russian proletarianism versus useless French Aestheticism was disingenuous—after all, Sergei Eisenstein and Grigori Alexandrov had recently made *Romance Sentimentale*, a short abstract film, in France. Yet at the turn of the 1930s, seismic events seemed to split 'art' and 'political' films into separate continents, and some members of the WFPL, such as Leo Seltzer and Tom Brandon, imagined a division between proletarian and avant-garde cinema within the ranks of their organization. Film historians have mostly followed this bisection by chronicling political filmmaking and experimental cinema as separate entities. For example, in *Cinema Strikes Back! Radical Filmmaking in the United States, 1930-42*, Russell Campbell has characterized Ralph Steiner as a member of the 'bourgeois avant-garde', and does not dwell on American experimental cinema despite providing an illuminating analysis of montage and political art. The same applies to William Alexander's *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931-1932*.⁷ On the other hand, in his survey of avant-garde cinema, Jan-Christopher Horak pays scant attention to productions by the WFPL, and subsequent organizations such as NYKINO and Frontier Films, presenting the experimental cinema movement as a constellation of amateur or avant-garde filmmakers working independently of political concerns.⁸ This is not to imply crudely that the one ignores artistry and the other entirely eschews politics but, rather, that conceptually disentangling strands of cinema practice into separate areas might provide narrative clarity but disrupts a synthetic understanding. This chapter will therefore discuss political and avant-garde cinema within one argument.

There are, however, two precedent projects that need to be mentioned. Vlada Petric's 1973 PhD thesis, 'Soviet Revolutionary Films in America (1926-1936)', assesses both the theoretical and practical impact of developments in Russian cinema on American filmmakers and writers.⁹ Petric's coverage of this area is informative, but

⁷ Russell Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back: Radical Filmmaking in the United States 1930-1942*, Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1982, p. 118.

⁸ Jan-Christopher Horak, 'The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919-1945' in Jan-Christopher Horak, ed., *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde 1919-1945*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1995.

⁹ Vladimir K. Petric, 'Soviet Revolutionary Films in America (1926-1935): Part One: The Theoretical Impact. Part Two: The Practical Impact', PhD Thesis, New York University, 1973. Petric's thesis was the outcome of research conducted in 1970-71 on

remains ultimately contained within a specific narrative centred around largely technical matters with limited analysis of any broader ramifications. Conversely, Charles Wolfe's essay 'Straight Shots and Crooked Paths: Social Documentary and the Avant-Garde in the 1930s' makes many useful observations—especially in his sophisticated treatment of straight photography—but tends to underplay the massive impact of Soviet cinema, and also obscures the inherent divisions within the field of political cinema.¹⁰ In contrast to Petric and Wolfe's accounts, this chapter concerns American 'kino' practice in relation to the machine aesthetic, locating discourse on Soviet montage, experiments in abstraction, and production of political newsreels within a specific milieu.

The call for an American radical film movement and a forum on Soviet film grew loud as the Depression settled over America, and was answered in 1931 with the foundation of the WFPL in New York, under the auspices of Workers' International Relief (hereafter WIR). Although there was much debate concerning the direction of its film production, the WFPL solely produced political newsreels, emulating the Russian agit-prop cinema of Dziga Vertov's *Kino-Pravda*. This chapter concerns films by three filmmakers who became members of the WFPL—Ralph Steiner's *Mechanical Principles* (1930), Jay Leyda's *A Bronx Morning* (1931), and Lewis Jacobs's *Footnote to Fact* (1933). Crucially, these films were not WFPL productions—indeed Steiner's film predated the formation of the League—but existed in the awkward space between 'art' and 'political' cinema. Steiner's film was an uncompromising eleven-minute assembly of close-up shots of machine parts in motion. Leyda's semi-abstract study of the Bronx and Jacobs's pithy polemic on Depression-era America also broke from WFPL strictures. Neither wholly 'abstract' nor bluntly political, these films were modest efforts towards a lyrical cinema of resistance.

It is important to locate these films historically within the fractured emergence of experimental cinema in America. As Horak has pointed out, experimental cinema in America was conceived in response to European work:

behalf of the Moscow Film Archive, with the cooperation of the Film Study Center at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and under the supervision of filmmaker Willard van Dyke.

¹⁰ Charles Wolfe, 'Straight Shots and Crooked Paths: Social Documentary and the Avant-Garde in the 1930s', in Horak, ed., *Lovers of Cinema*.

the very fact that they were born out of the *reception* of European avant-garde films in *America* inscribed their position: while often borrowing or quoting the formal techniques of the European avant-garde, they demonstrated a certain wild eclecticism, innovativeness, and at times naiveté that was only possible for American filmmakers working far from Paris or Berlin, the centers of Western high culture.¹¹

As American experimental cinema was partly a re-contextualization of European and Soviet cinema in an American setting, it is necessary to discuss the introduction of European and Soviet cinema into the United States and to determine contexts of display. A seminal moment in this process was the construction in 1929 of the Film Guild Cinema, designed by Frederick Kiesler as an experimental cinema for showing for experimental films. It is also useful to assess the discourse on montage, particularly in the short-lived journal *Experimental Cinema*, as an avant-garde forum where experimentation and polemic were served as a single brew.

The variegated field of American independent filmmaking in the 1920s and 1930s yielded an array of experimental short films. It is useful to provide some kind of definition of ‘experimental’ or ‘avant-garde’ cinema. Writing in 1947, the former Dadaist and filmmaker Hans Richter provided a distillation of ‘avant-garde cinema’:

in the ten years between ’21 and ’31 there developed an independent artistic movement in cinematography. This movement was called the Avantgarde. It was the only independent artistic movement in the history of cinematography until today. This art movement in film was parallel to such movements in plastic art as Expressionism, Futurism, Cubism, and Dadaism. It was non-commercial, non-representational, but international. It included artists from eleven countries; Australia, Belgium, England, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Spain, Sweden, USSR, and the United States.¹²

In respect of a purely ‘non-representational’ cinema, Richter was referring partly to the experiments of Walter Ruttmann, László Moholy-Nagy, and Viking Eggeling, as well as his own *Filmstudie*, which were, for the most part, ‘cinéma pur’ abstract animations or

¹¹ Horak, ‘The First American Film Avant-Garde’, p. 29.

¹² Hans Richter, ‘A History of the Avantgarde’, in Frank Stauffacher, ed., *Art in Cinema: A Symposium on the Avantgarde Film*, San Francisco Museum of Art, 1947, p. 6.

studies of light effects.¹³ Abstraction was one variant of avant-garde production, but Richter's classification of avant-garde cinema also included such productions as Man Ray *Les Mystères du Château du Dé*, René Clair's *Entr'acte* and Richter's *Ghosts Before Breakfast*, films with live action and an arbitrary yet perceptible narrative structures. The assertion that avant-garde cinema was 'non-commercial' was also problematic, as some experimental films did have a limited commercial release, and some experimental filmmakers used the critical success of their early films as a means of breaking into the commercial film industry. Richter perhaps meant that the films were conceived outside of the film industry for a private audience and any commercial afterlife did not disrupt their original 'non-commercial' status. This attempt to anchor experimental cinema as an arena outside of commerce valorized avant-garde filmmakers for privileging curiosity into the possibilities of film over the profit motive.

Horak supplies a broader, less partisan, classification of the early producers of experimental cinema: 'These cineastes moved freely between avant-garde film and other endeavours: documentary, industrials, experimental narrative, film criticism, film exhibition, painting, and photography...many were primarily painters or photographers who only 'dabbled' in film and photography'.¹⁴ Instead of being an entirely 'non-industry' area of production, 'the avant-garde and a growing amateur film movement were two alternative discourses on the fringes of the commercial mainstream that for at least a few years overlapped'.¹⁵ Jacobs was a paradigm figure. He worked for a commercial trailer company, edited *Experimental Cinema*, and produced footage for both the WFPL and his own film experiments.

If experimental cinema in America had blurred boundaries, then a history of experimental films is unavoidably selective. Whereas Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand's *Manhatta* is usually credited as the first 'art' film produced in America—meaning the

¹³ 'Cinéma pur', as defined by Henri Chomette, meant that 'the cinema can draw from itself a new potentiality, which, leaving behind the logic of events and the reality of objects, engenders a series of visions that are unknown—inconceivable outside the union of the lens and the moving reel of film, intrinsic cinema—or if you will, pure cinema'. Henri Chomette cited in Jan-Christopher Horak, 'Discovering Pure Cinema: Avant-garde Film in the '20s, *Afterimage*, Summer 1980, p. 4.

¹⁴ Horak, 'The First American Film Avant-Garde', p. 15.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 18.

first film produced by artists as a work of art—then it was by no means the first experimental film. For example, early shorts produced by Edwin S. Porter for the Edison Manufacturing Co in the early years of the century, such as *Jack and the Beanstalk* (1902) and *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* (1906), experimented with superimposition to heighten fantastical and comic narratives in a manner derived from George Méliès, the French pioneer of imaginative cinema. Yet these were films produced as novelty commodities in a new medium of popular entertainment, designed to be shown as part of a programme that was vaudeville in character. On the erratic margins of Hollywood and experimental cinema were films such as D. W. Griffiths's *The House with Closed Shutters* (1910) and Victor Fleming's *When the Clouds Roll By* (1919), which toyed with narrative and technical trickery. Likewise King Vidor, who incorporated a miniature city symphony of angular photography and jagged geometry into his 1928 feature *The Crowd*, produced the innovative 1929 short *The Bridge*, which used superimposition and montage. A special case was Slavko Vorkapich, who collaborated with Robert Florey on the atmospheric experimental pieces *The Life and Death of 9413: A Hollywood Extra* (1927) and *The Love of Zero* (1928), and whose prowess with montage later made him one of Hollywood's most sought after editors.

Indeed, these latter two films especially illustrate this intersection of avant-garde, amateur, and Hollywood film practices. Having arrived in America in 1921, the French-born Florey had been an assistant to Josef von Sternberg, the celebrated German director, and had worked in Hollywood as a journalist, publicist, and assistant director. Vorkapich, a Yugoslavian émigré, who as a cameraman would later create some startling montage pieces for mainstream Hollywood productions such as *Manhattan Cocktail* of 1928 and *Maytime* of 1937, was recruited chiefly because he owned a one lens De Vry, referred to by Florey as a 'toy camera'.¹⁶ With inventive use of a minimal budget and basic equipment, Florey, assisted by Vorkapich, produced *The Life and Death of 9413: A Hollywood Extra* (Fig. 138), a potent mix of Expressionist angularity, frantic jumpcuts and satirical swipes at the callow Hollywood system. The film was shown privately to an impressed Charlie Chaplin, who then screened it to important

¹⁶ Robert Florey, cited in Brian Taves, 'Robert Florey and the Hollywood Avant-Garde', in Horak, ed., *Lovers of Cinema*, p. 96.

Hollywood colleagues, notably Douglas Fairbanks and United Artists president Joseph Schenck. Schenck had the film shown at the Broadway United Artists cinema and later throughout America as part of the programme for the Gloria Swanson picture *Sadie Thompson*.¹⁷ The film was commercially successful, and Florey eventually made a feature version in 1936, entitled *Hollywood Boulevard*. By contrast, *The Love of Zero* (Fig. 139) was more obscure in narrative and experimental in technique, and failed to garner widespread support, proving that only a limited amount of experimentation, when coupled with narrative clarity, was acceptable in Hollywood. Thus these films epitomized the limits of experimental cinema on the fringe of Hollywood, and both Florey and Vorkapich were eventually absorbed into the industry—although Vorkapich also became a much-respected lecturer on film and a member of the WFPL.

Display was a problem for filmmakers working outside of the Hollywood studio system, especially for those located on the other side of the country. Whereas modernist literature, photography, and graphic art could all be disseminated easily through reproductions in magazines, experimental cinema required a venue—a cinema, and at the very least a projector and screen (whether white wall or sheet). Films were often displayed on an ad hoc basis, and a brief glance at correspondence between Marcel Duchamp and Jane Heap of the Little Review Gallery gives an insight into these private screenings. Signing himself Rose Sélavy, Duchamp wrote a clutch of notes to Heap concerning the screening of his film *Anaemic Cinema*, which was made in 1926. In the first note, he worried:

I don't want to show that film publicly because it's obscure in its captions (some of them) and French in its captions (cannot be translated). 5 out of 10 minutes of the film are captions and I don't want to show only the spirals. Privately I'll do all you want!!!¹⁸

Further insights can be gleaned from a later letter, in which Duchamp wrote:

¹⁷ Taves, *ibid*, pp. 98-99.

¹⁸ Marcel Duchamp (signed Rose Sélavy) to Jane Heap, undated c. 1926, Box 6 Folder 25, LRP.

Sheeler has arranged to show me his film “New York” [i.e. *Manhatta*] tomorrow Thursday at 1.30 sharp at Miles Studio...I will take my film [*Anaemic Cinema*] and will have it projected...don't be late it is rented by the half hour.¹⁹

Duchamp's reference to *Manhatta* was pertinent. As the first American experimental film, there was no obvious place to exhibit it on completion in 1920. Horak writes that ‘American avant-garde filmmakers—unlike their European counterparts—could not at this early date rely on alternative, non-commercial distribution and exhibition organizations, such as film clubs and societies’.²⁰ In fact, Sheeler and Strand were able to find a commercial venue for *Manhatta* in 1921, the Rialto on Broadway, but with a cool critical and commercial response it was taken off after one week.²¹ The film was also shown at Marius de Zayas' gallery in 1922, to accompany an exhibition of Sheeler's paintings and still photography. *Manhatta* was also one of the few American experimental films to travel outside of the United States, and was screened at the 1923 Dada Fair in Paris and also in London in 1926. In sum, the fractured exhibition history of *Manhatta* revealed the modest range of commercial options but also the variety of non-commercial opportunities available to filmmakers at the start of the decade.

The situation improved when a host of ‘little cinemas’ appeared in the mid-1920s. Yet these cinemas were, as Tony Guzman states, founded to counter a dearth of home-grown ‘artistic’ films by importing foreign movies: ‘if one rejected the films coming out of the major Hollywood studios, there were not a lot of alternatives [as] the handful of pioneers making artistic or experimental films in America in the late 1920s were insufficient to programme even a single theatre [therefore] the little theatres were forced to look abroad to Europe for their films’.²² Aside from Sheeler and Strand, the two other important American experimental filmmakers of the early 1920s were Man Ray, who produced *Le Retour à la Raison* (1923) and *Emak Bakia* (1926), and Dudley

¹⁹ Marcel Duchamp to Jane Heap, undated c. 1926, Box 6 Folder, 25, LRP.

²⁰ Jan-Christopher Horak, ‘Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler's *Manhatta*’, in Horak, *Lovers of Cinema*, p. 270.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Tony Guzman, ‘The Little Theatre Movement: The Institutionalization of European Art-Films in America’, *Film History*, Volume 17, 2005, p. 261.

Murphy, who co-directed *Ballet Mécanique* (1923) with Fernand Léger and Man Ray. Both were based in Paris, and their films belonged properly to the French avant-garde—in much the same way, Stella Simon's 1928 *Hande* was a product of the German avant-garde. With the exception of Robert Flaherty's short documentary *24 Dollar Island* (1926), Melville Webber and Dr. James Sibley Watson's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1927), and Florey and Vorkapich's aforementioned films, American experimental cinema was, in contrast with Europe, practically dormant until the end of the decade brought Steiner's *H2O*. Steiner noted in his autobiography that *H2O* was considered to be the 'second earliest American "art" film'.²³

As Guzman states, this paucity of production resulted in increased importation of European films. If the introduction of foreign movies into America in the first half of the decade was sporadic, then a landmark moment was undoubtedly the American release of Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) (Fig. 140). When premiered by Goldwyn at the Capitol Theater in 1921, the film fared badly in commercial terms but its innovative settings and hallucinatory sequences slowly resonated throughout artistic circles, gradually generating interest in foreign films. Guzman writes that:

The Cabinet of Dr Caligari galvanized the embryonic culture of serious film appreciation. It attracted rapturous reviews from film critics and drew cultural commentaries from many who seldom ventured near film. The film was the cornerstone of the little theatre movement.²⁴

In discussing the reception of the film as a model for the politics of reception, Mike Budd goes further by arguing that the film exposed the absence of 'corresponding institutions of art cinema reception—theater, critical discourse, and a defined, perhaps even self-conscious audience', but would 'on its New York release become a significant occasion in the early development of those alternative institutions of reception'.²⁵

However, these institutions did not emerge until the middle of the decade. In 1926 the

²³ Ralph Steiner, *A Point of View*, Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1979, p. 12.

²⁴ Guzman, 'The Little Theatre Movement', pp. 262-3.

²⁵ Mike Budd, 'The National Board of Review and the Early Art Cinema in New York: "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" as Affirmative Culture', *Cinema Journal*, Volume 26, No.1, Autumn 1986, p. 7.

Screen Guild began showing foreign films at the Shadowbox on West 12 Street in New York, and soon after several small cinema associations emerged across the country. These included the Little Theatre of the Motion Picture Guild in Cleveland, the Filmarte in Hollywood, the Fine Arts Theatre in Boston, the Motion Picture Guild in Philadelphia, and the Brooklyn Film Guild. These 'little cinema' groups would hire a cinema, often for one night a week, to screen European and American short experimental films and foreign, especially German and Russian, features. In New York, the Film Associates Inc (which included Jane Heap and Frederick Kiesler) was launched in October 1926 and opened with *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* at the Fifth Avenue Playhouse.²⁶

The Film Arts Guild, also founded in 1926 (as the International Film Arts Guild), was the most dynamic of the 'little cinemas'. Its director was Symon Gould, who had overseen operations with the Screen Guild.²⁷ The Film Arts Guild showed many seminal foreign movies of the 1920s, including *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* and *The Battleship Potemkin*, but also screened experimental short films, such as *Manhatta* and *Ballet Mécanique*. After short spells at several unsatisfactory locations, including the Guild Theatre, Cameo Theatre, and Carnegie Hall (Gould having complained that 'none of these houses provide physical arrangements suited for the best projection of pictures') the Film Art Guild opened its own cinema, the Film Guild Cinema, on West Eighth Street in February 1929.²⁸ Designed by Kiesler, the cinema was heralded as a 'screen-center devoted to cinema art' and the 'first 100% cinema'.²⁹ It was also notable as one of the first 'International Style' buildings in the United States. Gould claimed that it was 'a structure directly inspired by the innate necessities of the cinema and embodying revolutionary principles of architectural formations, both exterior and interior'.³⁰ It was scheduled for completion in September 1928, was opened unfinished on 1 February 1929, and finally completed the following month. From Douglas Fox's

²⁶ This group was notable for a committee that also included Sheldon Cheney, Gilbert Seldes, and Kenneth Macgowan.

²⁷ Gould would later achieve some notoriety as the founder, in 1948, of the American Vegetarian Party.

²⁸ Symon Gould, 'The Film Arts Guild', undated, non-paginated, FKP.

²⁹ 'Film Guild Cinema', *New Masses*, January 1929, p. 17.

³⁰ Gould, 'The Film Arts Guild', op. cit.

extensive survey of the building in *Exhibitors Herald World*, we know that although the building was only leased to the Film Arts Guild for twenty-one years at \$25,000, and that the cinema could only seat 485 people, the total cost of the project was a sizeable \$450,000.³¹

With a 'De Stijl' or 'Neues Bauen' frontage (Fig. 29), featuring asymmetric intersecting orthogonal white concrete pillars against a smooth black surface with large irregular windows, and an axonometric marquee and electric sign, the exterior of the building advertised the Modernism (and possibly 'European-ness') of the films screened inside. The interior was yet more striking in ambition and innovation. Whilst the foyer and the lobby (Fig. 141), replete with bespoke furniture and décor, continued the asymmetric geometry and sleek Modernism of the exterior, the auditorium (Fig. 142) offered some unique innovations, most importantly Kiesler's invention of the 'screenoscope'. As Fox described it:

the auditorium has many surfaces of projection and is the main feature of the house. The medium of this new projection is called a "screenoscope". The screen proper is circled with a giant wooden ring, from proscenium arch to floor, a fixture said to correct the angle of vision for a person seated in any part of the house. Behind the ring is a curtain which opens in four directions and which can be manipulated so that a screen of any size or shape is mechanically obtainable...by means of two sliding silver shutters, this ring, or lens of the camera, closes between the presentations.³²

With two giant black screens, fifty-five feet long and twenty feet high at the front, an enormous silver screen running along the entire ceiling (Fig. 143), and the capability of projecting onto the side walls, one writer described 'the whole funnel-like theatre is this one huge four-sided screen'.³³ Kiesler explained that the 'screenoscope' was designed:

so that the spectators can be immersed in the drama they are watching.... take for instance a war play, such as *What Price Glory* or *The Big Parade*. The cannons and trucks could appear to be passing down the sidewalks, the airplanes would be flying

³¹ Douglas Fox, 'The Film Guild Cinema: An Experiment in Theatre Design', *Exhibitors Herald World*, March 16 1929, p. 15.

³² Ibid.

³³ 'Film Guild Builds Four-Screen Theatre', *Educational Screen*, January 1929, FKP.

overhead, and the story would be underway on the stage screen. It is possible to split a picture into many parts in this manner and give an incredible realistic effect.³⁴

Guzman imagines that this effect was ‘like a kind of early version of Cinerama’.³⁵ In keeping with the machine aesthetic of the architecture, design, and projection technology, the auditorium was devised acoustically, as Kiesler explained to Fox, for mechanical rather than orchestral musical accompaniment, although the cinema was not fitted with the technology for sound films. One reviewer noted that ‘while plans are drawn for uptown talkie palaces that will seat thousands, the Film Art Guild completes a little playhouse, unique and completely “ultra”—as different as the widely heralded experimental theatres of Germany and Russia’.³⁶ With the subtitle ‘house of shadow silence’, the cinema was designed solely for silent movies.

D. W. Griffiths, George Gershwin, Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, Michael Gold, Princess Matchabelli, Walter Lippmann, and Otto Kahn attended the opening night. Dreiser made a speech, most likely based on an article he wrote for that month’s issue of *New Masses*. The article was printed next to an advertisement for the cinema, which boasted, with ‘new typography’ stylings by Kiesler, that the cinema was the ‘quintessence of cinema’. Dreiser’s clarion call for the Film Arts Guild, a ‘pioneer organization’, was couched in an angry invective against Hollywood.³⁷ Whereas the Russians had developed a new intrinsically cinematic cinema, that is one not derived from the theatre, the Film Arts Guild:

has been quick and first to recognize the superiority of this method as opposed to the American money method. It has not only sponsored Russian films in America, but better, has constantly emphasized such aspects of the film art as are inherently opposed to merely meretricious and ignorant entertainment—the guide and light of the Hollywood lords.³⁸

³⁴ Kiesler, ‘Building a Cinema Theatre’, *New York Evening Post*, 2 February 1929, FKP.

³⁵ Guzman, ‘The Little Theatre Movement’, p. 281.

³⁶ Gilbert Swan, ‘The Sidewalks of New York’, *Times Union*, February 1929, FKP.

³⁷ Theodore Dreiser, ‘Dreiser on Hollywood’, *New Masses*, January 1929, p. 17.

³⁸ Ibid.

The programme for the opening night married with the experimental Modernism of the building. The first feature was a 1927 Sovkino production entitled *Dva Dnya* (*Two Days*), directed by George Stabajov for the Ukrainian VUFKU (All-Ukrainian Photo-Cinema Administration) studio. The Film Guild Cinema would continue its commitment to Russian film by showing Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) on two separate occasions and Alexander Dovzhenko's *Arsenal* (1928). According to Guzman, the cinema showed a total of fourteen Soviet films in 1929 alone.³⁹ Yet the Film Guild also championed experimental short films, and the programme for the opening night included Paul Peroff's *The Frog Princess*, which was a short fairytale animation in colour, Stella Simon's *Hande*, and Watson and Webber's effective amateur experiment in 'Caligari-esque' Expressionism, *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Typically, the press dismissed Simon's innovative film, a ballet of human hands (Fig. 144), as pretentious nonsense, or, as John S. Cohen Jr put it, a 'silly photographic stunt'.⁴⁰

Common to all who visited the Film Guild Cinema was the comparability of the auditorium to the inside of a camera, as if looking down to the ocular screen through the extended bellows of a camera. The 'camera eye' was uniquely inscribed in the design and architecture of the cinema, and the audience became, by extension, both viewer and camera. If the type of film imagined by Kiesler, a fully immersive three-dimensional 'virtual reality' epic, had not been made, then *The Man with a Movie Camera*, Vertov's frenetic 'camera eye' montage, made an adequate substitute. Petric writes that:

underscoring the perceptual distinction between reality as it appears in the exterior world and as it is presented on the screen, *The Man with a Movie Camera* proposes a unification of the human eye with the "Machine Eye," in order to create a more substantial, more dynamic, and more revealing vision of reality.⁴¹

In the final scene, a superimposed camera shutter dilates and contracts over a human eye to produce the metaphoric 'kino-eye' (Fig. 145)—a moment that must have been especially effective in the Film Guild Cinema's optic screen.

³⁹ Guzman, 'The Little Theatre Movement', p. 280.

⁴⁰ John S. Cohen Jr., 'A Cinema Moderne', *The New York Sun*, 2 February 1929, FKP.

⁴¹ Petric, 'Soviet Revolutionary Films in America', p. 128.

Alongside the International Theatre Exposition, the New Playwrights Theatre, and the Machine-Age Exposition, the Film Guild Cinema was a seminal moment in the chequered introduction of Constructivism into the United States. As we have seen, Kiesler's International Constructivism was the more broadly utopic version practiced by Mondrian and van Doesburg, rather than Russian Constructivism, the revolutionary materialism of Alexei Gan, Vsevolod Meyerhold, and Vertov. Indeed, Kiesler's conception of an absorptive cinematic experience was more reminiscent of Siegfried Kracauer's description of 'distraction' as an addictive cultural opiate than of Benjamin's notion, derived from Meyerhold via Piscator and Brecht, that cinema, like the Epic Theatre, had inherent qualities that would radicalize audience members into expert activists.⁴² Yet it is important to remember that the introduction of Constructivism into the United States was for the most part not politically motivated. Indeed, the success of Russian films in America in the 1920s was more attributable to their technical merits rather than their ideological messages.

Russian films were introduced into the United States before the Revolution, and were 'marketed as "Russian art films"...to capitalize on the fame of the Moscow Art Theater'.⁴³ The first Soviet film to be shown in America was Alexander Sanin's 1919/20 feature *Polikushka*. It was brought to New York in 1923 by Vladimir Nelidoff, an émigré former ship's crewmember masquerading as the film's director, and shown privately without permission, although it was officially released in America in 1927.⁴⁴ Petric writes that whilst the 6 December 1926 premiere of Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 *The Battleship Potemkin*, marketed as *Armoured Cruiser Potemkin*, is commonly referred to as the first official Soviet release (under the auspices of Amkino, the body founded to promote Russian films in America), Yakov Protazanov's less celebrated *Breaking Chairs*, also of 1925, was in fact released three days earlier in Chicago, with support

⁴² Siegfried Kracauer, 'Cult of Distraction', in *The Mass Ornament: The Weimar Essays*, trans. T. Levin, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 325; Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', 1937, in *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt, ed., trans. H. Zorn, London: Pimlico, 1999, p. 233. See also Frederick J. Schwartz, *Blind Spots: Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth-Century Germany*, Yale University Press, 2005.

⁴³ Guzman, 'The Little Theatre Movement', p. 263.

⁴⁴ Petric, 'Soviet Revolutionary Films in America', p. 28.

from WIR.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, *Potemkin* (Fig. 146) was the landmark Russian film as far as the American audience was concerned, and was widely heralded on release as a giant leap forward in cinematic art. For example, William A. Barrett, writing in the *National Board of Review Magazine*, embraced the film as ‘perhaps the finest art yet put upon the screen...an art in its effect swifter, more inclusive, more accurate and absolute and directly expressive than the effect to be had from the sense of seeing itself’.⁴⁶

Lewis Jacobs later wrote of the arrival of Soviet cinema:

the Soviet films followed quickly after the German films, bursting upon the American film scene between 1926 and 1929...Cries of “propaganda” were mingled with the cheers for their dynamic forcefulness. When the smoke of conflict had cleared away, it was apparent that a new era had begun in screen esthetics; a profound conception of film composition, consummating all the structural principles that had come down from Méliès, Porter, Griffith, and the other Europeans, had been formulated. With the Soviet films the art of movies became clarified.⁴⁷

Between 1926 and 1936, 184 Soviet films were released in the United States (by contrast, 956 American films were released in Russia in the same period), despite the fact that the United States government did not formally recognize the Soviet Union until 1933.⁴⁸ Therefore, almost every significant development in Soviet cinema, from Protazanov’s futuristic *Aelita* (USSR 1924, USA 1929) to Dovzhenko’s poetic rural study *Earth* (USSR 1929, USA 1930), eventually appeared on New York screens. Interest in Soviet film increased towards the end of the decade and some films were given a mainstream release, often within months of their original Soviet release. Vsevolod Pudovkin’s *The End of St. Petersburg* (Fig. 147) was greeted with particular fanfare after a short run at Hammerstein’s in late 1928, and was subsequently the first Soviet movie to be screened at the Roxy, New York’s largest and most lavish cinema,

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 31. It was actually first viewed in September 1926 at a press screening organized by Gould and the Film Arts Guild, *ibid*, p. 63.

⁴⁶ William A. Barrett, ‘First Thoughts on Potemkin’, *National Board of Review Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 6, November 1926, p. 6.

⁴⁷ Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939, p. 312.

⁴⁸ Petric, ‘Soviet Revolutionary Films in America’, p. 26.

which was built in 1927 at a giant cost of \$12 million.⁴⁹ Critical response was feverish and the film was listed as one of the ten best movies of 1928 in *The Film Daily*.⁵⁰ The enthusiasm for *The End of St. Petersburg* anticipated a rise in the mass attendance of Soviet films. As Petric writes:

prior to 1931 it was a commonly acknowledged fact that foreign films were experimental and artistic achievements which gratified intellectual circles and that they served as a cultural counter-balance to the Hollywood productions which were principally made for pure entertainment. Starting in the year 1931 the films imported from abroad took on the same popularity as that awarded to domestic Hollywood products.⁵¹

This popularization did not diminish with the development of the talkies. Whilst Nikolai Ekk's *The Road to Life* was the first Soviet sound film to be imported to America, Dovzhenko's *Ivan* was listed by the *National Board of Review Magazine* as one of the ten best films of 1933.⁵²

Despite this latter popularity, attributable to the perceived superiority of the films to Hollywood's output but also possibly to mass politicization in the Depression, the most developed responses to Soviet films came from those intellectual circles to which Petric refers. Aside from the *National Board of Review Magazine* and *Exceptional Photoplays*, coverage of Russian films could be found, from the mid-1920s onwards, in *Theatre Arts Monthly*, *Hound and Horn*, *New Masses*, *Theatre Guild Magazine*, *Creative Art*, *Experimental Cinema*, *The Left*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *Educational Screen*, and the British journal *Close-Up*. The key commentators on Russian film in these publications were Alexander Bakshy, Lewis Jacobs, Louis Lozowick, Seymour Stern, Barnet G. Braver-Mann, David Platt, Winifred Bryher, and Harry Alan Potamkin. Potamkin cited the Russian-English Bakshy, whose first articles on film appeared in 1913, as the most important critic writing in English during the

⁴⁹ Steven J. Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America*, Princeton University Press, 1998, p.173; Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film*, p. 320.

⁵⁰ Petric, 'Soviet Revolutionary Films in America', p. 33.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 36.

⁵² Ibid, p. 38.

1920s.⁵³ As a contributor to *The Nation* and *Theatre Arts Monthly*, Bakshy frequently covered Soviet cinema with an irreverent and informed analysis. For instance, he termed *Potemkin* ‘an unpretentious “realistic” film and no masterpiece in any sense of the word (particularly in its mutilated version as shown in America)—but decidedly a pioneer work of a far-reaching importance’.⁵⁴ Attuned to discourse on the ‘camera eye’, Bakshy discussed the ‘cinema eye’ as ‘a much more powerful instrument for seeing detail, magnifying the image, and bringing distant objects into view than mankind has been endowed with’.⁵⁵

Whilst there had been a handful of studies of Soviet cinema, notably the diminutive section on cinema in Huntley Carter’s *The New Theater and Cinema of Soviet Russia* of 1924, the majority were produced in the second half of the decade, reflecting the increased importation of Russian films. Furthermore, Carter’s study appeared prior to the development of montage. In 1960 Leyda pointed out in *Kino*, arguably the definitive historical study of Russian film, that the three major Russian film directors of the 1920s, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Dovzhenko, did not join the Soviet cinema until 1924. Before then the Soviet cinema had been embryonic.⁵⁶ In 1922, Lenin directed that the film industry, to be supervised by Narkompros, the Peoples Commissariat for Education, produce both entertaining and educational films, whilst proceeding carefully with the latter for fear of producing counter-effective propaganda.⁵⁷ Starved of funds, from 1922 organizations such as VUFKU, and Goskino (the official state cinema), and groups like FEKS (Factory of the Eccentric Actor) and Vertov’s Kino-Eye sought ways of producing dynamic and entertaining imagery with a limited budget. In 1924, Lev Kuleshov directed *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr.*

⁵³ Harry Alan Potamkin, ‘Alexander Bakshy’, *National Board of Review Magazine*, September 1927, reprinted in Lewis Jacobs, ed., *The Compound Cinema: The Film Writings of Harry Alan Potamkin*, Columbia University, 1977, p. 546.

⁵⁴ Alexander Bakshy, ‘The Road to Art in the Motion Picture’, *Theatre Arts Monthly*, June 1927, p. 459.

⁵⁵ Alexander Bakshy, ‘The New Art of the Moving Picture’, *Theatre Arts Monthly*, April 1927, p. 280.

⁵⁶ Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*, New York: Collier Books, 1960, p. 170.

⁵⁷ V. I. Lenin, ‘Directive on Cinema Affairs’, 17 January 1922, reprinted in Taylor and Christie, eds., *The Film Factory*, p. 56.

West in the Land of the Bolsheviks (Fig. 148), which grafted American slapstick to Soviet propaganda to produce a comic satire of western anti-Sovietism. The film reflected Kuleshov's concept of cinematic 'Americanism', which was based on the principle that Russians preferred foreign films and that American detective films were the most popular.⁵⁸ He noted that American films were based on 'cinema specificity' rather than 'theatricality', as scenes were constructed specifically for the film without imitating theatre conventions.⁵⁹ American films proved that 'the essence of cinema lies in composition, the change of one filmed fragment to another', and thus:

we must look for the organizational basis of cinema, not in the confines of the filmed fragment, but in the way these fragments relate to one another... This kind of method is technically known as "American shots" and joining together the fragments that constitute the film is called MONTAGE. Genuine cinema is a montage of "American shots" and the essence of cinema, its method of achieving maximum effect, is montage.⁶⁰

Kuleshov had first experimented with montage in 1918—the so-called 'Kuleshov Effect' was created by juxtaposing newsreel images, such as a child's coffin or a half-naked woman, with a shot of the actor Mozhukhin's impassive face, which seemingly altered mood according to the juxtaposed scene.

In 1925, Kuleshov's tentative experiments in montage were considerably expanded by Eisenstein in *Strike!* (Fig. 149) and *Potemkin*, both produced for Goskino. These films moved at a furious pace, with scenes composed of shots from multiple rapidly shifting points of view, using editing to create associative connections. In *Strike!*, the action alternates at one stage between a massacre in workers' tenements and the slaughter of a cow in an abattoir. Eisenstein disassociated montage from American cinema, as 'America has not understood montage as a new element, a new opportunity' and American films were merely representational narratives.⁶¹ Emerging from Meyerhold's Theatre and Proletkul't, Eisenstein's conception of montage was

⁵⁸ Lev Kuleshov, 'Americanism', *Kino-Fot*, August 1922, reprinted in *ibid*, p. 72.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 73.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*.

⁶¹ Sergei Eisenstein, 'Béla Forgets the Scissors', *Kino*, 20 July 1926, reprinted in *ibid*, p. 149.

essentially Constructivist. In 1923, whilst still directing theatre productions for Proletkul't, he wrote of the 'montage of attractions', analogous to 'Grosz's rough sketches' and 'the elements of Rodchenko's photo-illustrations', where:

an attraction...is any aggressive moment in theatre, i.e. any element of it that subjects the audience to emotional or psychological influence, verified by experience and mathematically calculated to produce specific emotional shocks in the spectator in their proper order with the whole. These shocks provide the only opportunity of perceiving the ideological aspect of what is being shown, the final ideological conclusion.⁶²

Although Eisenstein's *Potemkin* was released in 1926 in America, a discourse on montage did not emerge until the end of the decade. At the time, critics had been puzzled and awed in equal measure. William Barrett wrote of the dizzying veracity of the action sequences in *Potemkin*, that 'most of this has been done by a swift, flickering assortment and throwing together of little pieces of pictures...as if the news reel cameraman were running about madly, stumbling and falling over himself at times, but ever busy with his crank'.⁶³ In 1929, Lozowick provided a definition of 'montage', which he explained was 'mounting, i.e. cutting film into separate units and reassembling these in a given order'.⁶⁴ Montage was 'the very life of Russian cinematic practice' and was used by Eisenstein to 'do conscious violence to the spectators' established habits, and direct their emotions into desired channels'.⁶⁵ Montage was frequently discussed in Potamkin's monthly film reviews for *New Masses*. Potamkin had a uniquely sophisticated appreciation of film technique, and produced articulate studies on the variations of montage, such as Eisenstein's theories of 'metric', 'rhythmic', 'tonal', and 'over-tone' montage. Like Bakshy, Potamkin was evaluative in his appraisals. He wrote that:

⁶² Sergei Eisenstein, 'The Montage of Attractions', *Lef*, June/ July 1923, reprinted in *ibid*, p. 87.

⁶³ Barrett, 'First Thoughts on Potemkin', p. 6.

⁶⁴ Louis Lozowick 'The Soviet Cinema: Eisenstein and Pudovkin', *Theatre Arts Monthly*, September 1929, p. 670.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*.

metric montage...is effected by the *measurement* of unvarying *time*. It is matter-of-fact, rudimentary impact. Is not therefore the term “metric montage” a contradiction? Rhythmic detail is a breach in the simple progression to stress the content, the *impression*, of a particular component scene. Rhythm is the patterning of rhythmic detail in accord with the distribution of content. Therefore “rhythmic montage” is really a redundancy.⁶⁶

He was also discerning about Soviet films—discussing *Earth*, he complained that ‘Dovzhenko’s failure is the failure of a singer who has chosen the wrong pitch’, by producing a film on collectivization that was too lyrical and ‘introspective’.⁶⁷

Although communist periodicals and newspapers, in particular *New Masses* and the *Daily Worker*, covered film in the middle and later 1920s, Soviet cinema was not debated in depth until a dedicated forum for discussion of experimental and political cinema emerged at the end of the decade. Since the inception of *Close-Up* in July 1927 the editors had expressed an interest in Soviet film, and began covering Soviet films in earnest in 1928 with a review of *The End of St Petersburg* and a serial on *Six Russian Films*. In October 1928, *Close-Up* published ‘The Sound Film: A Statement from the USSR’, signed by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Alexandrov, which was one of the first examples of Soviet film theory published in English. Yet if *Close-Up* did not ignore the political uses of cinema, and from 1930 supported the nascent British workers’ cinema, the editors were more concerned with presenting experimental cinema as a broad church, and Soviet cinema remained but one of its subjects. Articles such as Orlton West’s ‘Russian Cutting’ and R. Bond’s ‘This Montage Business’, approached montage as a technical, rather than incipiently political, problematic.⁶⁸

Close-Up’s tendency to separate filmmaking from politics was noted by Potamkin, himself a regular contributor, when he reviewed co-editor Winifred Bryher’s 1929 *Film Problems of Soviet Russia* for the first issue of *Experimental Cinema* in February 1930.⁶⁹ Bryher’s book dealt with official hostility in Britain towards Soviet

⁶⁶ Harry Alan Potamkin, ‘Eisenstein and the Theory of Cinema’, *Hound and Horn*, July 1933, reprinted Jacobs, *The Compound Cinema*, p. 438.

⁶⁷ Harry Alan Potamkin, ‘Movies: “Soil”’, *New Masses*, December 1930, p. 19.

⁶⁸ Orlton West, ‘Russian Cutting’, *Close-Up*, June 1929; R. Bond, ‘This Montage Business’, *Close-Up*, November 1929.

cinema (which Potamkin termed a ‘non-cinematic problem’) and argued the case for the artistic merit of the films despite their function as propaganda.⁷⁰ For Potamkin, this was a ‘quite acceptable middleman’s social philosophy’ which unfortunately presented the ‘Russian attack’ as ‘harmless’.⁷¹ In contrast, the ‘Russian idea is dangerous, decidedly dangerous, to the prevailing acceptations’, as ‘the dangerous idea creates the dangerous, or heroic, structure—ultimately’.⁷² Potamkin argued that the force of Soviet cinema could only be gauged through its form, as ‘form is the conception constantly *informing* the structure’, and that the ‘approximation’ or ‘attainment’ of form was its aim and achievement.⁷³ Potamkin’s cinematic formalism situated form as a structural realization of the ‘Russian social idea’, which comprised ‘the social-revolution, the criticism of the bourgeoisie, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the ultimate of collectivism, the re-education of the mass and the individual in the mass, the conquest of the egocentric mind’.⁷⁴

This emphasis on the revolutionary properties of form itself distinguished Potamkin writings and *Experimental Cinema* from any previous film discourse in the English language. Although *Experimental Cinema* only ran for five issues over four years, it represented the most sophisticated forum in America for debate on cinema to date. The magazine was published by a loose group of filmmakers and writers called the Cinema Crafters, including Jacobs, Platt, Braver-Mann, and Stern, and was founded in Philadelphia, before moving with Jacobs to New York in 1931, and eventually expiring in Los Angeles in 1934. Whilst the cover of the first issue featured a still from Eisenstein’s *Ten Days that Shook the World* (1927), the magazine was not initially conceived as an organ on political film, but as a more leftfield American cousin of *Close-Up*. As the subheading stated on the first two issues, *Experimental Cinema* was founded simply as ‘A Monthly Projecting Important International Film Manifestations’. *Experimental Cinema* aimed to provide a forum for makers as well as critics of film, and

⁷⁰ Harry Alan Potamkin, ‘Film Problems of Soviet Russia’, *Experimental Cinema*, February 1930, p. 3.

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Ibid, p. 4.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Pabst, Clair, Griffiths, von Stroheim, and Chaplin (amongst others) were listed as exemplary practitioners. Yet the first issue was a 'Form and Montage Number' (Fig. 150), and an announcement overleaf informed that the magazine was founded to 'consolidate and orient...individuals and groups scattered throughout America, Europe, and the USSR'.⁷⁵

Experimental Cinema was imagined as the forum of an emerging avant-garde—a statement read, 'Experimental Cinema as the advance guard of a new motion picture art believes it will be the nucleus of a profound and vital force toward the creation of a world wide cinema ideology'.⁷⁶ The opening article of the first issue, Platt's 'The New Cinema', enthused over 'the boundless potentialities of the new cinema of the future with its explorations into the legends and myths of the new age of the machine'.⁷⁷ In Platt's passionate machine aesthetic, cinema was a mythic, even spiritual medium. He wrote that 'Man has conquered the air without wing, in cinema, and the atom has finally given up its precious secret; of myths like these is born a great ideal'.⁷⁸ Yet despite praising *Potemkin*, *Arsenal*, and *The End of St. Petersburg*, Platt's view of the relevance of Soviet culture for American film was ambiguous:

today, particularly in America, at a time when there is everywhere desire to escape the perils of a mechanical age, at a time when it has become almost fashionable to fall back into traditional positions, beaten paths off the main road, without even attempt at analysis or *positive* statement of the problems of mechanism as to their social, political or psychological elements, and in this sense, the humanism of those who look back to New England for authority, is as far away from the actual problems of the American scene as the humanitarianism of those who look forward to the USSR for a point of reference.⁷⁹

Platt's statement contrasted with Potamkin's aforementioned 'Film Problems of Soviet Russia' and several other articles that addressed Soviet films, such as Bakshy's

⁷⁶ 'Announcement', *Experimental Cinema*, Vol. 1, No. 1, February 1930, inside cover.

⁷⁷ David Platt, 'The New Cinema', *Experimental Cinema*, Vol. 1, No. 1, February 1930, p. 1.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

‘Dynamic Composition’, which referred to Eisenstein, Dovzhenko and Vertov, proving the political openness of *Experimental Cinema* at its inception.

The loudest exponent of montage was Stern, who fumed at the ‘the lunacy of the Hollywood tradition’ and called for ‘complete emancipation from the tyranny of the former world-conquering Hollywood film-methods’ by an adoption of Soviet film techniques:

in every sphere, thanks to the Soviet attainments, we can at last record the disestablishment of that false, commercially-inspired American technique which, for fifteen years, has dominated and retarded the entire conception and technique of film-construction throughout the world. Artistically and technically, thus far, Moscow has vanquished Hollywood...I realize how impoverished is the film-ideology of radical American cinematography.⁸⁰

Stern supplemented these pronouncements with an especially commissioned translation of Pudovkin’s ‘Film Direction and Film Manuscript’, which stated that ‘the foundation of film-art is montage’ as ‘every object must be brought upon the screen through montage, that it receives not photographic, but cinematographic, reality’.⁸¹ Montage was the chosen weapon for battling Hollywood, and Stern proclaimed that ‘MONTAGE IS THE FULFILLMENT OF THE IMAGE-IDEA THROUGH THE FILM IN DYNAMIC AND VISUAL FORM’.⁸² He unleashed a volley of hyperbole:

words freighted with the Mosaic thunder of law! Words rich in explicit injunctions of unity, universe-logic, universe-necessity, universe-majesty, that few will apprehend and fewer find possible of attainment...Out of such words will emerge the images that will conquer man.⁸³

The religiosity of this sentiment was further evident in a piece by Platt in the second issue where he invoked a ‘spiritual *monism*’ that celebrated ‘Machinery, Bridges, Automobiles, Zeppelins, Dynamos, the Cinema’ as ‘more important for our ideology

⁸⁰ Seymour Stern, ‘Principle of the New-World Cinema’, *ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

⁸¹ Vsevolod Pudovkin, ‘Film Direction and Film Manuscript’, trans. Christen Gang, *ibid.*, p. 5

⁸² Stern, ‘Principles of the New-World Cinema’, p. 17.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

than the literature, painting or music of the day desperately struggling in a cul de sac and most of which exalts negative values entirely outside modern life'.⁸⁴ A second instalment of Stern's heroic montage manifesto assailed the Hollywood film industry, and was underscored by Jacobs's exploratory essay on film form. Jacobs wrote that 'in America the cinema has become a parasitic medium conditioned for sex, nomads and daydreamers. Its plastics are projected upon the most melodramatic aspects of behaviour; a fetish is made of the cinema's fact recording powers, and its celluloid marionettes are deified'.⁸⁵

The early issues of *Experimental Cinema* thus presented montage as the site of a social, possibly spiritual, revolution against Hollywood's cinematic concretization of American capitalism. Financial difficulties forced the magazine to cease publication for several months, but when it returned in February 1931 (Fig. 151) a crucial change of direction had taken place—following the establishment of the WFPL in January, *Experimental Cinema* had radicalized.⁸⁶ An opening statement marked the change: 'After half a year of financial and other difficulties, we are finally enabled to appear—with an intensification and a clarification of policy which will bring *Experimental Cinema* into close relationship with the labor movement in America'.⁸⁷ There was now a 'proletarian basis for our organ', and *Experimental Cinema* officially aligned itself with the WFPL and a smaller organization, the American Prolet-Kino.⁸⁸ Instead of merely mirroring the art of film, Hollywood now represented 'the tool of American imperialist political policy'.⁸⁹ The new aim of *Experimental Cinema* was to counter this ideological appropriation of film by exposing 'capitalist propaganda', by aiding the production of proletarian cinema, and by educating film students—all of which were tenets of the WFPL—and these aims were encapsulated in a final

⁸⁴ David Platt, 'Focus and Mechanism', *Experimental Cinema*, Vol. 1, No. 2, June 1930, p. 3.

⁸⁵ Lewis Jacobs, 'The New Cinema: A Preface to Film Form', *ibid.*, p. 13.

⁸⁶ According to William Alexander, Jacobs had personally financed the first two issues. William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film From 1931 to 1942*, Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 300.

⁸⁷ 'Statement', *Experimental Cinema*, Vol. 1, No. 3, February 1931, p. 3.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

declaration that 'SUPPORT OF EXPERIMENTAL CINEMA MEANS SUPPORT OF THE FIRST WORKERS FILM GROUP IN AMERICA'.⁹⁰

Spiritual sermons on the machine age were now muted. There was, however, increased concentration on Soviet cinema, with translations of writings by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, G. Boltiansky, and Victor Turin, and articles on 'The Position of Soviet Cinema' by Leon Moussinac, 'Turk-Sib and the Soviet Fact' by J. Lengyel, and 'Eisenstein' by Jacobs. Stern's 'Hollywood Bulletin' covered Robert Flaherty's trip to Russia, and Eisenstein in Mexico, as well as the reception of four recent Soviet films, including Eisenstein's *Old and New* (1929). Whilst attacks on Hollywood were limited to Braver-Mann's 'Vidor and Evasion', there was more coverage of oppositional film production. A short uncredited piece on 'Workers Films in New York' compared the foundation of the first American cinema by the Mutoscope and Biograph Company at 11 East 14 Street in 1906 with the similarly epochal formation of the WFPL a quarter century later at 7 East 14 Street.⁹¹ If the movie was now a 'weapon' of class war, the Soviet and American cinemas were considered in terms of 'class': 'the Soviet cinema is the cinema of a class that has achieved its historical task in conquering power. Its films are class films, just as the American film is that of a class in power—a reactionary class doomed to destruction'.⁹²

Stern further emphasized the practical revolutionary filmmaking programme for *Experimental Cinema* by producing a 'Section of a Continuity (Condensed)', an original montage story board set in an unnamed metropolis, American in character but guarded by 'Cossack-police', during the brutal suppression of a strike outside the skyscraper of City Hall.⁹³ The 'continuity' was made up of dramatic associative leaps, with one key scene of 'Flash Close-Ups' and 'Sharp Close-Ups' of alternate shots jumping back and forth from a 'mob-stick' battering a worker's head to the fare-register on a street-car.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ 'Workers Films in New York', *ibid.*, p. 37.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Seymour Stern, 'Principle of the New-World Cinema, Part II: The Film as Microcosmos', *ibid.*, p. 31.

⁹⁴ Ibid, pp. 31-34.

Stern's scenario would not be realized on film, but at least indicated the intended form and content of *Experimental Cinema*'s revolutionary American montage.⁹⁵

This new commitment to montage as a political force was also evident in Platt's hammering of critic Gilbert Seldes's *An Hour at the Movies and Talkies*, entitled 'One Hour with Gilbert Seldes is Too Much', for the latter's objection to propaganda in Soviet films.⁹⁶ He went as far as accusing Seldes of 'social Fascism'.⁹⁷ In fact, Platt's article was actually the latest salvo in a war of words between Seldes and the *Experimental Cinema* group. In July 1929, Seldes had written a piece entitled 'Some Russian Films' for *The New Republic* in which he allowed that, propaganda aside, Russian films were useful in provoking formal developments in Hollywood.⁹⁸ A month later, the journal printed both an angry letter from Stern and Seldes' reply. Stern had accused Seldes of an 'error of judgment' in attempting to include montage as yet another technique for Hollywood directors as 'the association-*montage* and the time-cutting...exist because the necessity of identifying social conditions with their symbols, social effects with social causes, makes them exist [therefore] it is the spirit, that is, the social and moral idea, that determines what the technique shall be'.⁹⁹ Without the necessary social idea, the technique was redundant. Seldes replied that his concerns were essentially aesthetic and technical, and argued that ideas and art were separate realms, although fervour for religion, Communism, or even Fascism, could produce great art irrespective of the doctrines.¹⁰⁰ A further response from Stern, furious at the abridgement of his letter, added that without an attendant revolution in 'Middletown',

⁹⁵ He later provided a montage for *Black Dawn*, Josef Berne's short film of 1933.

⁹⁶ David Platt, 'One Hour With Gilbert Seldes is Too Much', *ibid.*, p. 19. Seldes was an early advocate of film as an art form and a contributor to *Seven Arts*, a pioneering cultural journal of the 1910s. For a discussion of *Seven Arts*, see Casey Nelson Blake, *Beloved Community: The Cultural Criticism of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Lewis Mumford*, University of North Carolina Press, 1990.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Gilbert Seldes, 'Some Russian Films', *The New Republic*, 3 July 1929, p. 179.

⁹⁹ Seymour Stern, 'Russian and American Movies', *The New Republic*, 7 August 1929, p. 317.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

‘there is no chance for a purely intellectual revolution in Hollywood’.¹⁰¹ Stern argued that Seldes’ hopes of reforming Hollywood were futile as the industry was too powerful and always sacrificed quality where it might damage profits. He concluded that ‘Mr Seldes wants the cake, but disdains the dough for baking it’.¹⁰² This last jibe was quoted in Platt’s *Experimental Cinema* article of 1931, where the author returned to the earlier debate by asking ‘if it is true...that great men and great art can evolve out of Fascism as well as out of any other ism, where then are the signs, the portents of greatness, or of immanent greatness in Fascism?’¹⁰³

The politicization of *Experimental Cinema* was complemented by the appearance in Spring 1931 of *The Left*, ‘a quarterly of radical and experimental art’ which sought to free ‘the intellectual and artist from his blind bourgeois psychology, his pathological introspection, his defeatism and futile Liberalism’.¹⁰⁴ Stern was an associate editor, in charge of the magazine’s cinema department.¹⁰⁵ In his polemic on ‘A Working Class Cinema for America?’, Stern called for ‘*new forms*’ and ‘*new methods of montage*’ to counter the ‘*vampires that have sucked intelligence and kino-sense out of the brains of the American proletariat*’, and advocated ‘*rehabilitating the kino-sense of*

¹⁰¹ Seymour Stern, ‘What’s Wrong with the Movies’, *The New Republic*, 28 August 1929, p. 47. ‘Middletown’ was probably a reference to Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd’s *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture*, USA 1928, London: Constable and Co., 1929.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ David Platt, ‘One Hour with Gilbert Seldes is too Much’, p. 19.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Left!’, *The Left*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 1931, p.3. *The Left* was one of a host of Midwestern radical magazines, which included *The Anvil*, *Hinterland*, *Hub*, and the *Dubuque Dial*. It was edited by George Redfield and Jay du Von, whose operations were based in Davenport, Iowa. Stern, V. F. Calverton, John Herrmann, Joseph Kalar, Herbert Klein, Norman Macleod, and Donal McKenzie were associate editors. See Douglas Wixson, *Worker-Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism, 1898-1990*, University of Illinois Press, 1994, pp. 317-319.

¹⁰⁵ With articles by Braver-Mann, Jacobs, and Stern himself, as well as a translation of Mikhail Kaufmann’s ‘Evolution of the Soviet Cinema’ (reproduced from the Film und Foto catalogue), this section was a diminutive of *Experimental Cinema*, situated in a broader context of discussion about revolutionary critical theory, alongside prose and poetry by Russian and American writers.

the *mass-eye*: to *copulate with decinematized masses* in order to infuse new filmic life into them'.¹⁰⁶ He produced a manifesto for a political cinema:

A cinema of bread-lines and starvation in the streets
 A cinema of police clubbings and a reign of terror
 A cinema of screaming against fascist developments in the USA
 A cinema smashing lynch-law and gangster-law
 A cinema attacking with supreme fury, vehemence and passion the mightiest and most vicious capitalism, the most brutal class-exploiting "society", the world has ever known...
 But also, most necessarily, this:
 New montage-forms for typically American raw-material imagery.
 Synthetic montage.
 Synthetic imagery.¹⁰⁷

Stern revealed that 'there exists in the USA a small, scattered, but ideologically united, *left-wing* kino-group, consisting of Seymour Stern, Lewis Jacobs, Sam Brody, David Platt, B. G. Braver-Mann, a small squad of photographers doing news-reel work for the International Labor Defense, some first-rate photographers doing work for the *Labor Defender* and a number of less active but equally ardent followers'.¹⁰⁸ This activity stemmed from the two groups cited in *Experimental Cinema*, the WFPL and American Prolet-Kino. Whereas the former would produce newsreels of demonstrations in the 'Kino-Pravda' tradition, the latter would look to Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Dovzhenko, rather than Vertov, in taking the film as a 'highly *calculative construction*' that would use 'reconstructed reality'.¹⁰⁹ Yet it was clear that American Prolet-Kino was Stern's preferred organization, as he detailed the possibilities for 'agitation-film *on a large scale*' derived especially from Eisenstein's version of montage.¹¹⁰ Stern allowed that 'obstacles are many', and positioned the 'intellectual admirers' of Soviet cinema,

¹⁰⁶ Seymour Stern, 'A Working-Class Cinema for America?', *The Left*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 1931, pp. 69-70.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 70.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 71.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. Stern's preferment was explained by an advertisement for American Prolet-Kino in the back pages of *The Left*, which claimed status as 'the first film-producing organization of the American working-class' and listed Stern's Hollywood address for correspondence—in short, he *was* American Prolet-Kino.

presumably Seldes, as the first line of defence of the forces of reaction. Despite these hindrances he offered that ‘Capitalist America is wealthy, very wealthy, in image-symbol material for the future dialectic film’ and sketched a montage that was ‘CLASS in character’:

millionaire (capitalist)
thug
prize fighter
brainless, sweet-faced middle-class girl
“impartial” liberal
dinosaur.¹¹¹

The dinosaur represented the culmination of all the previous images, referring to a lumbering, powerful, but outmoded foe. However, American Prolet-Kino lacked the resources to produce any such movie. *The Left* fared little better, surviving for just one more issue, with no cinema section and just two articles on film.

If *Experimental Cinema* was affiliated with both American Prolet-Kino and the WFPL, then the latter, with its more realizable programme, was given greater emphasis. As stated, the WFPL (Fig. 152 and Fig. 153) was formed in January 1931, but its origins dated back to the inception of WIR in 1921. WIR was founded in Berlin, at Lenin and the Comintern’s request, by Willi Münzenberg, a pivotal member of the KPD, to provide international relief for the Volga famine, and expanded its horizons in 1923 to support victims of the Japanese earthquake.¹¹² By the mid 1920s, WIR had bases in several countries, including Italy, Sweden, France, Norway, and America. As the crisis diminished, WIR diversified its operations to financial support of workers, helping strikers and their dependents, and providing aid to the aged, invalid, and destitute. A further aim was to promote the Soviet Union internationally through the founding of workers’ cultural organizations, such as orchestras, theatre groups, dance groups, and film clubs. Following Lenin’s suggestion, Münzenberg championed the movies as a crucial tool of propaganda and WIR organized the international distribution of Soviet films. In 1924 WIR began financing the production of films through several production

¹¹¹ Ibid, p. 73.

¹¹² Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back*, p. 29.

companies—Mezhrabpom-Russ produced Pudovkin's major films of the period, including *Storm over Asia* and *The End of St. Petersburg*, whilst in Germany, Prometheus made *Mother Krause's Journey to Happiness* (1929) and *Kuhle Wampe* (1932), a Stefan Dudow and Bertolt Brecht collaboration.

Acting in America as 'Friends of Soviet Russia', WIR provided support for strikers at Passaic, New Bedford, and Gastonia. As well as producing *Soviet Russia Pictorial*, Friends of Soviet Russia's cultural activities included supporting groups such as the Workers Laboratory Theatre, the Red Dancers, and the Workers Camera League.¹¹³ It also held regular screenings of Soviet films—a September 1930 notice in *The Daily Worker* advertised a programme of combining *Potemkin* with comedy and Russian newsreels at the Ukrainian Labor Hall in Newark.¹¹⁴ As stated in the last chapter, the Workers Camera League was small camera club of around fifty, mostly Japanese, amateur photographers, which in late 1930 was reconstituted as the WFPL. The nucleus of the WFPL consisted of Tom Brandon, Sam Brody, Potamkin, Leo Seltzer, Lester Balog, and Robert Del Duca.¹¹⁵ The WFPL soon attracted a number of influential figures of experimental cinema, including Steiner and Jacobs in 1931, Leyda and Platt in 1933, and Vorkapich in 1934. They produced a manifesto, penned by Potamkin, which was published in the July 1931 issue of *Workers Theatre*. The WFPL was committed to 'the education of workers and others in the part the movie plays as a weapon of reaction' and consequently to 'the encouragement, support, and sustenance of the left critic and the left movie-maker who is documenting dramatically and

¹¹³ Screenings of Russian films raised \$20,000 for the Passaic strike in 1926, 'A Note on the History of the League', First National Film Conference—Pre-Conference Discussion, September 1934, Box 22, Folder 7, JLP.

¹¹⁴ *The Daily Worker*, 27 September 1930, p. 5.

¹¹⁵ Tom Brandon and Sam Brody were the de facto leaders of the WFPL. Whilst Brandon's background was as a political activist, boxer, and truck driver, the similarly militant Brody had a greater investment in leftist cultural practices. He was born in London in 1907 and moved to America in 1921. He spent time in Paris in the 1920s where he encountered Vertov's writings, which he subsequently translated and later published in *Film Front*. See Dziga Vertov, 'On Film Technique', *Film Front*, January 1934, and 'On Kino Eye', *Film Front*, January 1935. From 1929 he was a member of the John Reed Club in New York and worked with the Japanese Workers Camera Club. See Alexander, *Film on the Left*, for biographical information on the other WFPL members.

persuasively the disproportions in our present society'.¹¹⁶ The WFPL would work to build up an audience to sustain itself, would produce a periodical, would fight censorship, and would distribute 'suppressed films of importance' and 'neglected films of significance'.¹¹⁷ It was dedicated to activism, pledging to support strikers, fight 'class abuse and censorship', and counter the 'invidious portrayal of the foreign-born worker, the Negro, the oriental, the worker generally'.¹¹⁸

The manifesto also stated that 'the education of the workers and others in the part the movie plays as an instrument for social purposes in the USSR'.¹¹⁹ The WFPL continued WIR practice of screening films for workers, and League members would take portable projectors to pickets to entertain and educate strikers with Soviet films alongside their own productions.¹²⁰ A further task was the maintenance and repair of the WFPL collection of Russian films, and Seltzer remembered that 'we used to look at them over and over and over, and study them. Our job was to inspect them when they came back from screening, and we could study them frame-by-frame'.¹²¹ This intimate knowledge of Soviet cinema was reflected in the use of montage in WFPL films—Soviet montage theory being, of course, available in *Experimental Cinema*, particularly in Brody's translations of Dziga Vertov's writings.

Indeed, Vertov's low cost Kino-Pravda newsreels, rather than Eisenstein or Pudovkin's expensive dramatic productions, necessarily served as the model for WFPL practice. This was a consequence of expediency and the 'cinema verité' aesthetic of WFPL films was born of a slim budget: 'we shot 35mm silent, using cut rate "shortends" and beat-up old Eyemo and De Vry hand cameras plus the "portable" De

¹¹⁶ Harry Alan Potamkin, 'Film and Photo Call to Action', *Workers Theatre*, July 1931, p. 5.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Alexander, *Film on the Left*, p. 7.

¹¹⁹ Harry Alan Potamkin, 'Film and Photo Call to Action', p. 5.

¹²⁰ Russell Campbell, 'Leo Seltzer Interview: "A Total and Realistic Experience"', *Jumpcut*, No.14, 1977, p. 25. See also Leo Seltzer, 'Documenting the Depression of the 1930s: The Work of the Film and Photo League', *Film Library Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1980, reprinted in David Platt, *Celluloid Power: Social Film Criticism from "The Birth of a Nation" to "Judgment at Nuremberg"*, Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1992.

¹²¹ Ibid.

Vry and Acme projectors. We raised money through membership dues, bazaars, and affairs. Even with the financial support of our mother organization, the Workers' International Relief, it was always an uphill struggle'.¹²² Tom Brandon recalled that the League 'didn't spend a lot of time making experimental films...our films just had to have a social use'.¹²³ If the slogan of the WFPL was 'Film is a Weapon in the Class Struggle', then the WFPL filmmaking strategy involved the production and distribution of counter-newsreels, designed to provide an alternative viewpoint to the mainstream news services. WFPL films were deliberately simplistic as their aim was to communicate social struggles without artistic niceties that might distort or deaden the impact. Nonetheless, Leo Hurwitz remembered that whilst WFPL 'work was crude...its energy derived from a real sense of purpose, from doing something needed and new, from a personal identification with the subject matter'.¹²⁴

Many of these films were lost in a fire in 1935, and only nine survive from the approximately forty WFPL productions including those by the Detroit, Chicago, and Los Angeles branches, which were formed in the months after the New York branch.¹²⁵ The exact number is unclear as there were many short newsreels, compilations, and unfinished pieces. The films were mostly made from footage made by WFPL cameramen, chiefly Seltzer, of marches, rallies, and strikes. Unlike commercial newsreels, these were filmed from within the crowd, from the perspective of a demonstrator, often focusing on incidents of police or military violence. Some of the films were merely filmic records of events, such as *National Hunger March 1931* and

¹²² Tony Stafford, 'Samuel Brody Interview: The Camera as a Weapon in the Class Struggle', *Jump Cut*, No.14, 1977, p. 28.

¹²³ Fred Sweet, Eugene Rosow, Allan Francovich, Tom Brandon, 'Pioneers: An Interview with Tom Brandon', *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No.1, Autumn 1973, p. 20.

¹²⁴ Leo Hurwitz, 'One Man's Voyage: Ideas and Films in the 1930s', *Cinema Journal*, Autumn 1975, p. 9.

¹²⁵ The surviving films are:

New York branch: *National Hunger March*, *Bonus March*, *Hunger 1932*, *America Today*

Detroit branch: *Ford Massacre*.

Chicago branch: *Halsted Street*, *The Great Depression*, *Chicago Mayday*, *Peace Parade*, and *Workers Picnic*. See Tom Brandon, 'Survival List: Films of the Great Depression', in Platt, *Celluloid Power*, and Russell Campbell and William Alexander, 'Film and Photo League Filmography', *Jump Cut*, No. 14, 1977.

Hunger 1932, which followed two hunger marches to Washington, and were effectively collections of crowd shots with intertitles quoting unemployment statistics. *Ford Massacre* (1932) by the Detroit WFPL was distinguished by unique dramatic footage of a violent industrial conflict. From the heart of the crowd, Ford worker Joseph Hudyma captured a police attack on striking workers at the Dearborn plant that resulted in the killing of four of the strike leaders. As Alexander puts it, ‘the power of the film is not derived from the camerawork but from the grim events themselves’.¹²⁶ At one stage, the camera pans crazily back and forth as the demonstrators panic and run from tear gas and the charging police. In these films, the WFPL presented a unique perspective on social conflict, whilst treating aesthetic considerations as a secondary concern.

Two notable exceptions were Seltzer’s *America Today*—actually a serial of 1932-1934, although only one part survives—and *Bonus March* (1932), filmed by Seltzer and edited by Balog. Both of these films combined commercial newsreels with WFPL footage to create hard-nosed montage polemics. In the surviving episode of *America Today*, Seltzer conveyed the police suppression of workers who were protesting the arrival of the Nazi Emissary Hanns Weidemann in New York in 1933 as the behaviour of a Fascist state. He integrated footage of his own arrest taken by a commercial camera team within his film work, suggesting that cinematic class war was pitched on censorship and control over the camera eye. Seltzer then juxtaposed shots of recently instated President Roosevelt signing away prohibition with footage of a battleship firing its guns, and positioned this montage within a sequence on Mussolini, Hitler, and Nazi Germany. The message was clear—Roosevelt’s government became Fascist as it suppressed protests against Fascism, and an intertitle stated ‘Fascism and Militarism are their answer to mass unemployment and starvation’. This theme was continued in *Bonus March*, which followed the Hoover administration’s hammering of the Bonus Expeditionary Force. The bonus marchers consisted of about 20,000 Great War veterans demonstrating for an advance payment of bonuses, ‘adjusted compensation certificates’, that were due in 1945.¹²⁷ On 28 July 1932, police killed two

¹²⁶ Alexander, *Film on the Left*, p. 33.

¹²⁷ Michael E. Parrish, *Anxious Decades: America in Prosperity and Depression, 1920-1941*, New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1992, p. 258.

veterans whilst attempting to evict the Bonus Army from its encampment at Anacostia Flats in Washington. Following President Hoover's call for order, General Douglas MacArthur attacked the bonus marchers with cavalry, tanks, and infantry, armed with bayonets and tear gas, burning down and flattening the camp.¹²⁸ Seltzer remembered his second visit to the camp:

I got there just as the bonus marchers were being run out of Washington by MacArthur and the regular army, the cavalry, and the tanks. I filmed the whole area smoldering and burning, as I walked through it. The bonus marchers were already on their way, they were going to Johnstown, Pennsylvania. I walked through this place. It looked like a premature Hiroshima. Everything smoldering, bedsteads, personal belongings. There'd been families there, ex-servicemen had brought their wives and children—it was a Hooverville, right in the middle of Washington.¹²⁹

Seltzer cut this potent material—some of the shots of devastation resemble photographs of burnt out buildings by Evans—with commercial newsreels of the eviction and Balog produced an effective anti-war montage, which jumped from bodies in no-mans-land to homeless ex-servicemen asleep on New York streets, to emphasize the extent of the State's betrayal of the veterans.

Bonus March and *America Today* represented the peak of WFPL artistry.

Addressing the shortcomings of WFPL filmmaking in 1934 in his column in the *Daily Worker*, Mike Gold wrote that 'Lenin called the film the most powerful cultural weapon the militant working class could use', however 'our Film and Photo League has been in existence for some years, but outside of a few good newsreels, hasn't done much to bring this great cultural weapon to the working class. As yet they haven't produced a single reel of comedy, agitation, satire or working class drama'.¹³⁰ Gold cited Vertov's recent *Three Songs About Lenin* as a model and urged 'I hope somebody in the Film and Photo league finally learns how to do a film a tenth as good for proletarian America'.¹³¹ No such film was made, and by the time of Gold's comments the League was breaking

¹²⁸ One infant died from tear gas. The events caused national outrage. Ibid, p. 260.

¹²⁹ Russell Campbell, 'Leo Seltzer Interview', p. 26.

¹³⁰ Michael Gold, 'Change the World!', *The Daily Worker*, 5 November 1934, p. 7.

¹³¹ Ibid.

apart—Steiner and Hurwitz had already departed, with the intention of making more complex, visually arresting political films.

Steiner's departure from the WFPL and co-founding of NYKINO (short for New York Kino), which produced the short revolutionary dramas *Pie in the Sky* and the now lost *Café Universal* (both 1934), was caused by the League's inflexible commitment to 'newsreel' documentaries and low filmic ambitions. In a rare theoretical statement on 'Revolutionary Movie Production', Steiner argued the necessity of experimental studies, writing that 'the skill necessary to handle expertly the elements of the documentary form can only be acquired from laboratory work designed to educate and develop producers in this field'.¹³² He concluded that 'there can be no effective propaganda without good art'.¹³³ Steiner's class concerns were governed by aesthetic sensibilities. He wrote that 'if the film is eventually to be a powerful weapon in the class struggle, film groups must learn to speak effectively through the medium of film rather than with words...the use of the *film* by the bosses necessitates the use of the film by the workers'.¹³⁴ Campbell writes that this article 'revealed how far he had come, at least publicly, since his days as representative of the bourgeois avant-garde and creator of abstract studies of the play of light on water, the movement of model gears, and patterns of seaweed'.¹³⁵ In Steiner's conception of filmmaking, there was nonetheless continuity between earlier experimentation and later political work.

Steiner's actual camera work for the WFPL had been minimal, and consisted of recording the 1931 May Day celebrations, with assistance from Irving Lerner. His continuing commitment to experimentation was evident in regular screenings of his early films as a means of instruction in film technique at the WFPL and later at the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School.¹³⁶ In contrast to Stern's aforementioned critique of

¹³² Ralph Steiner, 'Revolutionary Movie Production', *New Theatre*, September 1934, p. 24.

¹³³ *Ibid*, pp. 23-4.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 22.

¹³⁵ Russell Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back*, p. 118.

¹³⁶ Named in honour of the lynchpin of the American political cinema after his death in 1933, the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School ran from late 1933 to 1934. Steiner taught filmmaking techniques there. Other lecturers included Jacobs, Hurwitz, Platt, Seltzer,

the aimless aestheticism of abstract cinema, Steiner saw no disjunction between abstraction and political film. As Campbell puts it, 'Steiner's objections to documentary techniques were practical ones, indicating a desire not to move into fiction, but to use creative intervention by the filmmaker in order to bolster revolutionary cinematic exploration of the real world'.¹³⁷ His earlier studies, *H2O*, *Surf and Seaweed*, and *Mechanical Principles*, predated his politicization and were thematically antithetical to WFPL practice. Yet if the first two films were abstractions of natural phenomena, in *Mechanical Principles* Steiner adapted the bitter irony of his still photography to produce an abstract satire on the machine age.

In a 1977 interview with Joel Zuker, Steiner described his first attempt at filmmaking:

I'd been a still photographer. I was terribly non-intellectual. I started a film. I had a car and I drove around the country and filmed signs, funny signs [and] crummy, silly advertising signs of all kinds. I got part way through that film and I realized that (a great light struck me), if you're making a film, what you were filming should move. Revelation! Then I did my first experimental film, *H2O* because it moved.¹³⁸

The production of *H2O* in 1929 was facilitated by a grant of \$14,000 from the Elmhurst Foundation, brokered by Edith J. R. Isaacs, then editor of *Theatre Arts Monthly*. Having filmed some close-up shots of water in streams, rivers and the ocean, Steiner encountered a common problem faced by still photographers making movies for the first time:

I knew nothing about film editing—few film makers outside Hollywood did—but I induced Aaron Copland [Steiner had studied recently music in Copland's classes at the New School for Social Research] to help me edit. He claimed he knew nothing about film, but I persuaded him that composer should know about unity and progression, and that these had to be important to film editing.¹³⁹

and Barton Yeager. Lack of funds and lecturers' political work meant that the school was short-lived. See Alexander, *Film on the Left*, pp. 50-52.

¹³⁷ Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back*, p. 119.

¹³⁸ Joel Zuker, 'Ralph Steiner', 1977 Interview, *Sightlines*, Fall 1978, p. 31.

¹³⁹ Steiner, *A Point of View*, p. 12.

Thus whilst Petric has termed *H2O* a 'montage study of the patterns of light and shadow reflected on water', the film's editing was straightforward, and the climax was achieved by increased abstraction rather than intensified sequencing.¹⁴⁰

The film is twelve minutes long, made up of a prologue, which provides the setting and theme with shots of water flowing from pipes and pumps (Fig. 154), and several 'chapters', devoted to the patterns of ripples and the effects of sunlight on water that make up the film proper. Some of the shots focused on reflections of objects, such as reeds, pipes, and posts. After a frenetic introduction, there are increasingly longer and more abstract studies of surface patterns (Fig. 155). At various points the close-up focus, obtained with a twelve inch lens, creates images that Jere Abbott soundly described as 'animated Chinese brush work' (Fig. 156).¹⁴¹ The camera is static throughout, as the sequences pass over the screen.

In the February 1930 issue of *Close-Up*, an unnamed reviewer relayed that Steiner had personally screened the film for him and had denounced 'trick' camera work.¹⁴² The reviewer wrote that 'if Mr. Steiner refers to aimless virtuosity, he is quite justified in his opposition to such devices as multiple exposure, direct use of the negative, prismatic distortion, truncation by angle, etc' and *H2O* 'is a good example of the direct method photographer's film'.¹⁴³ *H2O* exemplified 'the American attitude' and fitted 'into the American practice easily, since it asks not for the non-literal eye, but for the sharpening of the literal eye'.¹⁴⁴ The 'literalness' of *H2O* was not 'bluntness', but a straight photographic focus and the avoidance of interference to the camera eye. If Steiner merely represented water through the camera eye's unique vision, then this 'literal eye' is nonetheless analogous to Vertov's 'kino eye'. Vertov wrote, in 1923, that the kino-eye was 'more perfect than the human eye for examining the chaos of visual phenomena that resemble space'.¹⁴⁵ The 'kino-eye' was a means of seeing social relations beyond the limits of the human eye, whereas the 'literal eye' merely recorded

¹⁴⁰ Petric, 'Soviet Revolutionary Films in America', p. 427.

¹⁴¹ Jere Abbott, 'Films and Music', *Creative Art*, April 1931, p. 283.

¹⁴² '“H2O”', *Close-Up*, February 1930, p. 165.

¹⁴³ Ibid, pp. 165-6.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 166.

¹⁴⁵ Dziga Vertov, 'The Cine Eyes: A Revolution', p. 91.

objects in a direct manner. It is worth noting also that Pudovkin's *The End of St. Petersburg* and Viktor Turin's *Turksib* (1929) both featured multiple shots of light on water, and that such abstractions were commonplace in Soviet films. In each case, there was a union of montage, abstraction, and propaganda, whereas Steiner's film abstracted the abstraction from the equation. Despite this divergence, there is some indication that Steiner was engaged with Soviet cinema in other ways.

His next completed film was *Surf and Seaweed*, a more restrained version of *H2O*. However Steiner was also working on a film entitled *Silo*, which survives only as tantalising brace of strips (Fig. 157) in the January 1930 issue of *Theatre Arts Monthly*. These two sequences of four images apiece show that the film differed greatly from his other work. In the first, a close-up shows two farm workers gathering crops by a silo. In the other sequence, a stationary tractor dominates the foreground, whilst a farm worker drives two horses in the background. The context of these shots remains unclear, as the caption merely points out that 'this page shows two strips of [Steiner's] latest effort in the cinema, emphasizing the significance of man's struggle to obtain his sustenance from nature'—the strips were reproduced alongside three of Steiner's photographs, with editorial theme of 'man's relation to nature'.¹⁴⁶ Whether or not Steiner had viewed any recent Soviet movies extolling the radical transformations that the tractor would effect on the Russian countryside is unknown. Steiner wrote in a 1974 letter to Zuker that 'though theory was too muddy to read, the films at the Cameo were good to watch. I remember particularly *Strike!* and *Storm over Asia*, and something...by Dovzhenko'.¹⁴⁷ Certainly, the most widely discussed film on this subject, Dovzhenko's *Earth*, was not imported until late 1930. *Silo* remains therefore a fragmentary and ineluctable but significant moment that upsets classifications of Steiner's early cinematography as pure abstraction. This contrast of antique and modern farming methods was perhaps akin to the ironic juxtapositions Steiner's still photography, but also similar to Soviet propaganda on collectivization, and the rural setting also anticipated his contributions to *The Plough that Broke the Plains* of 1936.

¹⁴⁶ 'Man and Nature', *Theatre Arts Monthly*, January 1930, p. 77.

¹⁴⁷ Ralph Steiner, quoted in Zuker, *Ralph Steiner*, p. 197.

Although Steiner was not politicized until early 1931, his photographs had appeared in *New Masses* since 1927 and he already moved in circles that encompassed the radical Left. Steiner later recalled that he had met Eisenstein, Alexandrov, and Tisse when they visited New York in 1930. At a welcoming party held by Genevieve Taggard, Eisenstein had shocked Communist Party members by ignoring their ‘convoluted, pretentious kinds of questions’ and demanding instead to be given a tour of New York’s brothels. Steiner offered to drive them in his convertible to the Rose Danceland in Harlem in lieu of a brothel, but as it was too early in the evening took them to Wall Street to ‘drive through those canyons’.¹⁴⁸ According to Steiner, ‘they were absolutely amazed’.¹⁴⁹ Steiner left the group after ‘we found some blacks to take them to Harlem’.¹⁵⁰ These fragments of evidence indicate that current to producing *Mechanical Principles* in 1930, Steiner was familiar with Soviet cinema, was possibly producing work thematically similar to Soviet films, and was acquainted with the radical Left.

The exact date of the production of *Mechanical Principles* is hard to determine, although the film was certainly completed by March 1931 when it was shown at the ‘Music and Films’ evening of the Fourth Season of Copland-Sessions concerts at the Broadhurst Theatre on West 44 Street, with especially commissioned music from Mark Blitzstein and Colin McPhee, alongside *H2O*, *Surf and Seaweed*, and Alberto Cavalcanti’s *La P’tite Fille*.¹⁵¹ The film was shot at the Science Museum in New York, after Steiner had witnessed an exhibition of wooden mechanical devices known as ‘eccentrics’, which each performed a particular movement. The entire eleven minutes of *Mechanical Principles* are devoted to these repetitive mechanical operations (Fig. 158,

¹⁴⁸ Zuker, ‘Ralph Steiner’, p. 31.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Aaron Copland and Roger Sessions’s concerts were held in New York from 1928 to 1931 as a showcase for new American music. See Elliot Antokoletz, ‘Copland’s Gift to be Simple’, in Carol J. Oja and Judith Tick, eds., *Aaron Copland and his World*, Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 259. Copland was later involved in the Federal Music Project and the Works Progress Administration, and contributed to the New York City Composers’ Forum. See ‘Aaron Copland and the Composers’ Forum Laboratory: A Post-Concert Discussion, 24 February 1937’, transcribed and introduced by Melissa de Graaf, in *ibid*, pp. 395–412. Copland also provided the music for Steiner and Willard van Dyke’s *The City* (1939).

Fig. 159, and Fig. 160). Like *H2O*, the camera holds a static view on the sequence of changing machine parts. The gears shift and click in and out of position, the cogs rotate in alternate directions, pistons pump, and levers turn. The machines operate with fine and complex precision, but without purpose—the ‘eccentrics’ are functionless machines devised for their own mechanics alone. The focus is close-up, excluding the machines’ contours and context—unlike *H2O* there is no prologue that would even locate the machines within the exhibition. The sole indicator of the world outside of these mechanical movements is a plain two-dimensional background, the wall on which the several ‘eccentrics’ were affixed. As the film progresses from shots of slow moving levers, wheels, and pistons, to frantic spinning discs and cogs, it appears to accelerate, although this is due to the action of the machines rather than Steiner’s editing. As Macdonald puts it, ‘Steiner’s editing is, for all practical purposes, invisible: shot length varies according to Steiner’s interest in the various movements and the length of time the particular motions take’.¹⁵²

Mechanical Principles seems initially to fulfil the demands made by critics of the Machine-Age Exposition that the machine was best viewed in motion, rather than the static representations on display. In this sense, *Mechanical Principles* operates as a Precisionist painting or photograph in motion. Potamkin wrote in 1929 that the machine made the ideal subject for filmmakers:

there is no more insistent experience in our lives than contact with machine. It is with us from waking until sleeping, and, while we sleep, is still at work. Of all the things that move, none is more assertive than the machine. It is most logical, therefore, that the machine should force itself upon the eye of another machine, whose function it is to construct and present motion. The machine is, for this reason, a basic subject matter I recommend to the serious movie-maker, whether he choose a press, derrick, steam shovel or locomotive.¹⁵³

If the machine itself was a logical subject for the camera’s machine eye, then Steiner’s film certainly appeared to fulfil this promise.

¹⁵² Scott Macdonald ‘Ralph Steiner’, in Horak, *Lovers of Cinema*, p. 214.

¹⁵³ Harry Alan Potamkin, ‘The Magic of Machine Films’, *Movie Makers*, November 1929, reprinted in Jacobs, ed., *The Compound Cinema*, p. 74.

Yet perhaps a somewhat less adulatory engagement with the machine aesthetic is in evidence here. Macdonald provides a nuanced reading:

by 1931, when Steiner made *Mechanical Principles*, it may have been a reaction to the very different attitudes towards machinery evident in such well-known alternative films of the period as Dudley Murphy's *Ballet Mécanique*, Eisenstein's *Potemkin*, and Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera*. In these other films, machinery is beautiful and fascinating, not simply in itself but because of what it means: for Murphy/ Léger it is the essence of modern life; for Eisenstein, the embodiment of dialectical materialism; for Vertov, the heart of a new egalitarian society.¹⁵⁴

In these films, the machine was a whirring assemblage of metal parts (Fig. 161), an intrinsically industrial device, whereas Steiner's machines were non-functional wooden exercises in mechanical movement. If Steiner certainly had access to actual machines, as evidenced by photographs from around 1930 of industrial power switches and of Margaret Bourke-White (Fig. 162 and Fig. 163) at work in an industrial plant, then his decision to film the 'eccentrics' likely stemmed from unlikeness from industrial machines, their comic absurdity, and the filmic possibilities of their movements. The 'eccentrics' were anthropomorphic, and sometimes resembled small insects or miniature robots. M. F. Agha attended the Copland-Sessions night and reported that 'the mechanical actors became more human and were enveloped in a sort of mathematical humour. The audience actually laughed at the antics of one of them—a mean metallic dingus which was grasping a helpless bolt by the head!'¹⁵⁵ If Steiner's emphasis was comic, then the 'machine' was presented as a site of archaism. The technology here seems antiquated, as this is not the 'state of the art' gleaming steel of an actual machine but a collection of wooden models—'eccentric' devices fashioned and assembled by hand, like relics of the first machine age, also suggesting the 'hand-made' nature of the amateur film as opposed to Hollywood's assembly line production. The film coincides with rather than contradicts Steiner's photographic work of the time—the 'American Uncanny', discussed in the previous chapter, is palpable here in the spinning wooden beetles and laughing pistons of the 'eccentrics'. The mechanical focus on the wooden

¹⁵⁴ Macdonald, 'Ralph Steiner', p. 214.

¹⁵⁵ M. F. Agha, 'Ralph Steiner', *Creative Art*, January 1932, p. 39.

machines also has an ironic register in its precise rendering of the grains of wood in the ‘eccentrics’—the precision highlights their non-industrial nature. Abbott, who reviewed the Copland-Sessions night for *Creative Art* in 1931, found the machines disappointing, arguing that ‘it was unfortunate that the models lacked a certain reality it being obvious that wood had been used in place of steel’.¹⁵⁶ He favoured *H2O*, arguing that lags in tempo due to Steiner’s editing in *Mechanical Principles* undermined the motion of the machines.¹⁵⁷

However, Zuker sees the focus on ‘woodenness’ to be part of a general process of abstraction, and writes that:

by reducing the dimensions of the machines (through camera position), by pointing out their ‘woodenness’ (through choice of lighting techniques), and by disregarding the possibilities of manipulating filmic time (editing), Steiner confirms to us that his interest in these machines is limited to their shape and movement, i.e., their structural beauty.¹⁵⁸

Thus any possibility of a ‘political statement’ is ‘effaced by the film’s formal strategies’.¹⁵⁹ Unlike Vertov et al, Steiner’s machines are merely aesthetically pleasing objects in motion, like ripples and shadows on water or surf on the shore. However, Zuker’s understanding of Steiner’s nascent political associations is weak since, in a chapter entitled ‘Ralph Steiner: Political Filmmaker’, he suggests Steiner’s politicization apparently occurred only in the mid-1930s, when making *Café Universal* and *Pie in the Sky* with the Group Theatre. Zuker entirely elides both NYKINO, who produced these films, and the WFPL. His statement that *Mechanical Principles* is merely a ‘representation (cinematic articulation) of a representation (wooden models of machines)’ is formalist in the banal sense.¹⁶⁰ In my view, *Mechanical Principles* invokes the ‘camera eye’ satirically by drawing attention to the mechanical nature of the camera’s vision whilst simultaneously parading an absurd copy or ‘shadow’ of actual mechanical devices, analogous to the distorting shadows in his photograph *American*

¹⁵⁶ Abbott, ‘Films and Music’, p. 283.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Joel Zuker, *Ralph Steiner*, p. 138.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 140.

Rural Baroque.¹⁶¹ With the 'literal eye' of straight photography, Steiner's 'camera eye' satirizes the machine aesthetic by focusing with bitter comic precision on its vacuity, whilst bound inevitably to its own fetishizing machine aesthetic. This double bind renders it useless as a political statement, but also disrupts pure abstraction.

Conversely, despite what Zuker vaguely terms the 'constructivist reverberations' of *Mechanical Principles*, it diverges from Soviet films.¹⁶² The main technical difference is in the editing of the film, which was a self-confessed weak point in Steiner's practice, and specifically in the absence of 'montage'.¹⁶³ Perhaps Macdonald goes too far in stating (in relation to *H2O*), that 'one could argue that the increasing focus on composition, rather than montage...demonstrates what Steiner may have seen as the perceptual limitations inherent in the dependence on editing that characterized Eisenstein's work'.¹⁶⁴ Certainly, in the later 'Revolutionary Movie Production' article he seemed sceptical of the ubiquitous use of montage by the WFPL, arguing that 'the erroneous idea that the effectiveness of the shots does not matter so much since through montage...they could be made effective has weakened us too long'.¹⁶⁵ Steiner's

¹⁶¹ The satirical note in Steiner's filmmaking was further apparent in 1931, when he produced *Panther Woman of the Needle Trades*, a dramatic short devised by Mary Hughes with Yiddish Theatre and Group Theatre star Morris Carnovsky playing God. With some Constructivist sets, reminiscent of Boris Aronson's work for the Yiddish Theatre (see Chapter Two) and Expressionist lighting, this specifically Jewish satire of modern life was similar to Florey's *94213* and *The Love of Zero*. Steiner also made *Dance Film* in 1931, a co-production with C. Adolph Glassgold, starring Sophia Delza, Steiner also worked as cameraman on *Harbor Scene* (1932), *Granite/The Quarry* (1932), *G3* (1933). Horak's *Lovers of Cinema* also lists *City Film* (1927), *People Playing Croquet* (1929), and *Silo* (1929) as Steiner productions (p.379). Of all these films, only *Panther Woman of the Needle Trades* seems to have survived.

¹⁶² Zuker, *Ralph Steiner*, p. 140.

¹⁶³ Steiner was dismissive of his third completed film, deeming it 'from start to finish, in all departments, a plain mess'. This might be explained by his description of the Copland-Sessions showing: 'The music was not recorded, but was to be played by a sizeable orchestra in synchronization with the films. I knew almost nothing about splicing films, so they kept breaking during the performance. The projectionist would hurry to rethread the projector while the poor orchestra leader went mad slowing the orchestra down to get back into synchronization. When one film happened to end with the end of the music a loud cheer of relief went up from the whole audience', Steiner, *A Point of View*, p. 12.

¹⁶⁴ Macdonald, 'Ralph Steiner', p. 209.

¹⁶⁵ Steiner, 'Revolutionary Movie Production', p. 22.

resistance to montage in 1934 stemmed from its over-use in the WFPL. The eschewal of dialectical montage in *Mechanical Principles* was not a deliberate resistance, but witnessed a still photographer grappling with film, satirizing the machine aesthetic from within the machine, but with a low command of editorial technique.

One factor that differentiated *Mechanical Principles* from Steiner's earlier films was the assistance of Jay Leyda, although it is uncertain how much Leyda contributed to it.¹⁶⁶ Leyda, a young photographer and poet from Dayton, Ohio, arrived in New York in 1930.¹⁶⁷ Although he would eventually become America's leading expert on Russian film, his familiarity with contemporary Soviet cinema at this stage was limited—his later encyclopaedic knowledge stemmed from studying under Eisenstein in Russia from 1933 to 1936.¹⁶⁸ Leyda later cited the influence of Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera*, the first Soviet film that he saw in New York (probably at the Film Guild Cinema), on *A Bronx Morning*, his first film.¹⁶⁹ In an early theoretical piece, aimed at providing technical information for amateurs, he revealed a basic grasp of montage. Writing that:

experiment has proven that different methods of arranging the same group of scenes may result in widely varying reactions from the observer. The Russian, Kuleschow (sic), from whom much of the present eagerness for cinematic experiment in that country stems...interspersed three duplicates of the same scene of an actor with three other

¹⁶⁶ According to William Uricchio, Steiner had placed an advertisement in *The New Yorker* that called for 'an assistant on experimental films'. William Uricchio, 'The City Viewed', Horak, ed., *Lovers of Cinema*, p. 296.

¹⁶⁷ During 1930, Leyda found modest success in the literary field, publishing some experimental prose poems for magazines such as *Blues: A Magazine of New Rhythms* and *The Whirl*, his work appearing alongside that of Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams. *A Bronx Morning* was produced during the summer of 1931, and was funded by working as Steiner's assistant, as well as photographic work for *Arts Weekly* and *Vanity Fair*, and occasional art dealing. In a deal brokered by J. B. Neumann, Leyda sold a Henry Ward Beecher sculpture that he had found in a junk shop in Dayton to Mrs. Abby Rockefeller for \$2,500, which paid for the camera and film. See Jay Leyda, 'Note on a Bronx Morning', non-paginated, Box 21 Folder 21, JLP.

¹⁶⁸ He later remembered that he 'supplemented Dayton's five cinemas with domestic and European journals that wrote about and showed moments of films I couldn't see—*Experimental Cinema*, *Theatre Arts Monthly*...*La Revue du Cinéma*, *Hound and Horn*...*Der Querschnitt*...*Variétés*, and...*Close Up*'. Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

scenes [and] by varying the arrangement of this material, he was able to produce three definitely different emotional scenes.¹⁷⁰

Discussing scene construction—scenarios included a parade and a lawn party—Leyda advised montage to make ‘inanimate and apparently unrelated scenes produce an emotional effect’ in order to generate more ‘human interest’ and he recommended varying the length of shots, rather than pummelling the audience with constant jumps.¹⁷¹ Unlike Steiner’s sequential editing, Leyda argued that scenes should be assembled of multiple shots filmed from several angles, but cautioned against gimmickry such as ‘simply seeking unusual camera angles or taking a long series of short flashes [as] of itself this technique means nothing and may be as tiresome as would be the conventional series of medium shots and panorams’.¹⁷²

Nevertheless, *A Bronx Morning* brims with such experimental techniques—it is essentially a montage of abstractions and distortions. A cinematic journey into and around the Bronx, the film observes minor details on a bright summer’s morning, the area snatched in glimpses through defined light and shadows. With its jumpy editing, cropped figures, light effects, angular and aerial perspectives, shots from a train on the elevated railway and a tram, close ups of curious shop displays, billowing washing lines, birds in flight, and newspapers gliding on the breeze, it belongs to the city documentary genre, exemplified by Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a City* (1926), Moholy-Nagy’s *Berliner-Stilleben* (1926), Vertov’s *Man with the Movie Camera*, Cavalcanti’s *Rien Que Les Heures* (1926), and Jean Vigo and Boris Kaufman’s *A Propos de Nice* (1931).¹⁷³ Whilst it is indebted to Russian and German cinema, it should also be considered in the context of other New York city films, such as Sheeler and Strand’s *Manhatta*, Flaherty’s *24 Dollar Island*, Herman Weinberg’s *City Symphony* (1930),

¹⁷⁰ Jay Leyda, ‘Tips on Topicals’, *Movie Makers*, January 1931, p. 13.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ Petric claims that it was ‘doubtlessly inspired’ by Mikhail Kaufman’s *Moscow Today*, a 1927 Goskino production that was shown in New York in May 1929, where it ‘achieved greater success’ than his brother Denis ‘Dziga Vertov’ Kaufman’s *Man with the Movie Camera*. Having been unable to locate the film I cannot verify this, although Petric’s description of the film makes the comparison convincing. Petric, ‘Soviet Revolutionary Films in America’, pp. 433-434.

Florey's *Skyscraper Symphony* (1928), and Irving Browning's *City of Contrasts* (1931). However, *A Bronx Morning* (Fig. 164) is more a neighbourhood sonata than a city symphony—in contrast to these films, Leyda's film is concerned with the smallness of a locality at close range, at some remove from Manhattan's sublime skyscraper canyons.

A Bronx Morning runs for fourteen minutes, a sequence of 160 shots assembled loosely following the passing of time. The film opens with angular and aerial shots taken from an elevated train as it exits a tunnel. The Bronx is first glimpsed at speed through girders and cables, before the perspective moves to street level, viewed from a streetcar. Long (twelve seconds) shots are interspersed with short ones (four to six seconds). The next sequence introduces the Bronx with a montage of a spinning barber pole and revolving mannequin heads in a hat store. An intertitle announces 'The Bronx does business', followed by a selection of shots of store fronts, most of which offer discounts or sales. In one innovative image, the camera pans to the right following the words 'Price Down' painted on a shop window before arriving at a hand still painting the last letters. The film jumps through shots of fruit and vegetable stalls, with assembled close-ups of the produce and the vendors. A second comic moment occurs when the camera appears to retract from sign that says 'LOOK', revealing that the words belong to the advertisement of a sandwich man walking away. A second intertitle states 'and the Bronx lives' and is followed by several shots of the backs of apartment buildings intercut with New Vision shots of fire escapes. The sequence ends abruptly on a close-up of a window, which is greeted by a hastily pulled down blind. A final intertitle takes the action back 'on the street'. A curious sequence juxtaposes the chest of a large woman with the mechanical elevation of a store sign into a vertical position and a man hacking and scraping a block of ice. This montage also provides a comic moment—a lewd association is created between the crude mechanical erection of the increasingly phallic sign, the frantic hand movements of the iceman, and the close up on the woman's substantial chest—Leyda's notes refer to 'the chest of an old woman—heaving'.¹⁷⁴ The following five minutes of the film are a more general portrait of Bronx life—a series of prams, boys playing baseball and fighting, girls playing hopscotch and skipping, assorted cats and a dog, street sprinklers and fire hydrants, an

¹⁷⁴ Jay Leyda, *A Bronx Morning* Synopsis, Box 21 Folder 21, JLP.

ice cream man, and people on balconies. The action is quick rather than frantic, chopping through intensely lit close-ups of figures and objects. The final minute of the film follows the slow descent of a newspaper from a high window intercut with shots of flocks of birds in flight, swiftly changing direction. The closing shot is of a newspaper blowing across a street.

From this description, it should be clear that Leyda's montage differed from the newsreels of the WFPL. Whilst the film was not a polemic on the dispossessed and does not have an overt political objective, it nonetheless documented the early Depression—the contrast of the 'Bronx does business' legend with shots of stores advertising sales and discounts has an ironic note (Fig. 165). The modest means of the residents of this clearly working-class neighbourhood are made apparent by the gaudy necklaces and cheap hats that serve as luxury goods. Yet the film does not dwell on the unemployed, nor does it seek to show class differences or even extreme poverty—the main protagonists are mothers and their children and shopkeepers. Instead, it draws out the abstract cinematic possibilities of life in an urban space. It is more of a piece, therefore, with city films than WFPL productions.

A Bronx Morning also differs, however, from other New York films. Sheeler and Strand's *Manhatta* weaves Whitman's poetry around vertiginous shots from lofty skyscrapers that render the city's inhabitants, as Horak observes, 'antlike' as they spew from the ominous docking ferry and scuttle in the shadows of Wall Street's towers (Fig. 166).¹⁷⁵ Horak writes that:

the metaphor also applies to ocean liners and trains, which likewise move through the cityscape like living creatures, their technology apparently independent of human control. In this scheme of things, the skyscrapers become natural formations of concrete and steel, mountain peaks and deep canyons, surrounded by the glistening waters of the Hudson and East rivers.¹⁷⁶

Horak convincingly describes the film as a mixture of modernist technique and 'archaic or antimodernist' yearnings for a harmonious natural order. Whilst the abstract angularity and lack of narrative in *Manhatta* mark it as a milestone in American

¹⁷⁵ Jan-Christopher Horak, 'Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler's *Manhatta*', p. 279.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

experimental cinema, many shots resemble still photographs embellished with drifting smoke and steam. Like Steiner, Strand and Sheeler's greater familiarity with still photography seemed to hinder their understanding of cinematography.¹⁷⁷ In contrast, Leyda's film is strictly concerned with movement. Likewise, whereas *Manhatta* follows miniature citizens in mass from a distance, *A Bronx Morning* views the people of the neighbourhood at close range, often cropped to mere torsos and legs. If Sheeler and Strand sought a totality, then Leyda's film rendered its subject in fragments.

Flaherty's *24 Dollar Island*, subtitled a 'camera impression of New York', and Florey's *Skyscraper Symphony* respectively reveal the cinematic possibilities and limitations of Manhattan's skyscrapers. The pioneering maker of *Nanook of the North* (1922) was able to generate dynamic scenes with angular panning shots of moving cranes and ships. This short documentary (Fig. 167) focuses on the city as a working environment, which delimits distantiation by imbuing the city's workers with a concrete identity. In some shots, however, the focus on skyscrapers from fixed viewpoints highlights their stasis so that they appear like photographs, as in *Manhatta*. This problem was more pronounced in Florey's film (Fig. 168)—despite some graceful dissolves, the actual shots are effectively static New Vision images, comparable to still photography by Steiner, Sheeler, et al. An attempt to create dynamism by wiggling the camera makes the skyscrapers merely wobble and teeter, and the film lurches from the sublime to the ridiculous. In all these cases, the static skyscrapers prohibited dynamism, and too often resembled slide shows. Their silent power was better evoked, perhaps, in the oppressive cityscape of Vidor's *The Crowd*, where their immobility and regularity was used to highlight the gruesomely monotonous lives of office workers.

A Bronx Morning also differs from these examples in its specific and intimate locality within the city. In particular, *Manhatta* and *Skyscraper Symphony* survey the sheer canyons of skyscrapers, whereas *A Bronx Morning* is integrated in its area, close-up to the point of fragmentation. People and objects are interchangeable, rendered with the same close-ups, dramatic lighting, and stark angularity. For example, the

¹⁷⁷ However, Strand was shortly to embark on a career as a professional cameraman. His understanding of cinematic dynamism significantly increased, and his camera work for *Redes* (*The Wave*, directed by Paul Strand, 1935), *The Plough that Broke the Plains* (1936), and *Native Land* (1942) exemplified his sophistication as a filmmaker.

representation of work is not presented as a comment on labour but as visually striking motion. Petric writes that this ‘particularity’ of *A Bronx Morning* is closer to Vertov’s ‘method of isolating characteristic details from an environment and giving them new cinematic relevance through the succession of images’, than to Ruttmann’s *Berlin*, which uses montage in a more symphonic manner.¹⁷⁸ Despite this connection, the relation of Leyda’s film to Soviet cinema remains problematic. Without a guiding principle, the montage here was potentially undialectical as there was little antagonism in the juxtaposition of shots to create a complex synthesis. Furthermore, by fragmenting all objects and aestheticizing their interrelation, it risked a loss of association and a collapse into reification.

Potamkin’s somewhat harsh reaction to Weinberg’s *City Symphony* was predicated on this problem. Potamkin wrote that:

it is a montage film—if montage means, as it does not, the pell-mell piling of fragments. Herman knew of the use of the negative as positive, so he loaded his film with that utility. Any device has its specific values. Haphazard and dense application of it is disastrous...the entire film is unorganized, no pattern, rhythm, formal intention, is apprehended. And as for the photographic work: it is a beginner’s.¹⁷⁹

For Potamkin, dabbling in montage was mere ‘stylization’—‘its all etc cetera’, as ‘stylization here means lining one’s face with smears and moving like a scarecrow: a mixture of Robert Florey and *Beggars on Horseback*’.¹⁸⁰ His advice was brutal—the film should be destroyed, as ‘first films like first poems should be writ and discarded: unless the light of inspiration is vivid in them’.¹⁸¹

Whilst Leyda’s film also risked ‘montage for montage sake’, it was distinguished by the invocation of the uncanny in the quiet, fragmentary nature of the listless sequences. Lincoln Kirstein criticized the film, stating that ‘Mr Leyda has chosen to

¹⁷⁸ Petric, ‘Soviet Revolutionary Films in America’, p. 436.

¹⁷⁹ Harry Alan Potamkin, ‘New York Notes V’, *Close-Up*, October 1930, reprinted in Jacobs, *The Compound Cinema*, p. 397.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid. Sadly, Weinberg heeded Potamkin’s advice and an important film was lost, although some sequences were edited into his subsequent film, the lyrical romance *Autumn Fire*.

eliminate human figures and hence his continuous background is merely a background to which there is no foreground'.¹⁸² This observation captured the strange, passive quality of *A Bronx Morning*, underscored by the fact that, despite the specificity of the title, the film seems oddly divorced from time. As Chase Weaver puts it, 'time seems stilled in this conjunction. A morning becomes a vague period of time...becomes a timeless period in which all these events could be occurring simultaneously, and recurring daily'.¹⁸³ Many of the shots seem to quote uncanny imagery in photographs by Steiner, Evans, Atget, Boiffard and Brassai, especially the revolving mannequin heads in the hat store (Fig. 169), the billowing washing lines, and preponderance of signs, whether shop fronts or advertisements. In *A Bronx Morning*, the 'American Uncanny' resides in the paradox of an alienated locality, where daily life is rendered in the flashes, and blurs and people and objects are broken into equivalent fragments.

In a letter of June 1933, to Caroline Lejeune of the British *Observer*, Leyda wrote:

it is a short film, considered by me simple and communicative, about a place, that in addition, has hitherto been untouched by a movie camera. It is neither an exotic nor a romantic place. Because of this, and because it is so near to an American audience, I have never attempted a public showing in America.¹⁸⁴

By 'public' Leyda meant a commercial showing as the film had been shown the previous year in New York, first privately to Alfred Stieglitz at An American Place, then at Julien Levy's Gallery, where Leyda worked for Levy after leaving Steiner's studio, and also at the New School for Social Research. Furthermore, Leyda's reason for contacting Lejeune related to a showing of *A Bronx Morning* in London in December 1932 at the Tivoli Palace Theatre as part of a Film Society programme headed by *Kuhle*

¹⁸² Lincoln Kirstein, 'Experimental Films', *Arts Weekly* I, 25 March 1932, p. 52.

¹⁸³ Chase Weaver, 'Jay Leyda: A Bronx Morning', *Kit Ranken Film Catalogue*, 1979, Box 21, Folder 21, JLP.

¹⁸⁴ Leyda to Lejeune, 6 June 1933, copy, Box 9 Folder 15, JLP.

Wampe.¹⁸⁵ It was later shown at the Tatler Cinema, where apparently it was ‘booed off the screen at two successive showings, which automatically cancelled the booking’.¹⁸⁶

By 1932, Leyda had already contacted the Mezhrabpom Kino-School in Moscow, writing that ‘because there is no cinema school in America, I have worked independently, filming and finishing my own pictures, of both an experimental and documentary nature’.¹⁸⁷ He was also struggling with material. In July 1933, he informed Steiner that:

no new ideas (at least none you would approve) for films have appeared. The beggar film idea got considerably modified, but I don’t think considerably improved [therefore] I have decided...to return the purchased 200 feet of raw film to you, and to plan for an entrance into a course at the USSR Film School.¹⁸⁸

On arrival in Moscow, Leyda showed *A Bronx Morning* to Eisenstein and consequently joined the latter’s course in film direction. Between 1933 and 1936, Leyda worked with both Eisenstein and Vertov, in the process achieving an unparalleled experience and knowledge of Soviet film.

In April 1933, Leyda had withdrawn from active duties in the WFPL on the grounds that ‘at the present time I am faced with the absolute necessity of making a living [and] to provide for an education in film-making that I planned for myself’, and although his film camera was often used for WFPL shoots, the extent of his contribution is unclear.¹⁸⁹ Throughout his stay in Russia, Leyda maintained contact with the Left in

¹⁸⁵ The other films were *Steel* by Nicholas, *Water Folk* by Mary Field, *Colour Abstract* by Jen, *The Fox* by Walt Disney. ‘The Film Society Programmeme, 2.30 P.M., Sunday, 11 December 1932, Box 21, Folder 21, JLP.

¹⁸⁶ Leyda to Lejeune, op. cit. Lejeune replied that ‘I believe that your trouble has been mainly bad luck in coming last, after a series of very similar films from this continent—English audiences have been so overdone lately with films of “mean streets” in Berlin, Vienna, Amsterdam, Marseilles and all the rest of it that one more slice of everyday life among the old clothes and vegetables was more than they could bear!’, 14 July 1933, Box 9 Folder 15, JLP.

¹⁸⁷ Leyda to Mezhrabpom Kino-School (sic), 16 January 1932, copy, Box 3 Folder 37, JLP.

¹⁸⁸ Leyda to Steiner, 2 July 1933, copy, Box 8 Folder 21, JLP.

¹⁸⁹ Leyda to ‘Comrades of the Executive Committee’ of the WFPL, copy, 10 April 1933, Box 9 Folder 15, JLP. Elena Pinto Simon and David Stirk, ‘Jay Leyda: A Chronology’,

America, through personal correspondence and as Russian correspondent for *Theatre Arts Monthly*. When he returned to New York in 1936 to join MoMA as Assistant Curator in the Film Department, the WFPL had split, leaving the less militant Photo League. In Leah Ollman's words, 'the photography group split from the more politically engaged film section [and] concerned itself more with broadly humanistic issues than with a specific political agenda'.¹⁹⁰ Leyda gravitated towards the remnants of the film section. Under the name of 'Eugene Hill', he finally applied montage as a political weapon to highlight the plight of the *People of the Cumberland* (1937), a film he co-directed with Sidney Meyers for Frontier Films, with camera work supplied by Steiner.¹⁹¹

The schisms in the WFPL that led to the foundation of NYKINO and eventually Frontier Films lie outside the scope of this project. As indicated, these divisions concerned the recreation of action versus the newsreel. Steiner and Hurwitz's experimental NYKINO productions of *Café Universal* and *Pie in the Sky* (Fig. 170), and even Steiner and Willard van Dyke's 1935 *Hands* (Fig. 171), a WPA propaganda montage of close-ups of workers' hands, were conceived as correctives to WFPL work, on the assumption that a more effective political film might locate productive tension in the conflict of documentary and drama, and coalesce these tendencies into a dynamic synthesis of propaganda and experimentation.

Yet one earlier film straddled the divergent positions of NYKINO and the WFPL: Jacobs's *Footnote to Fact* features newsreel footage, experimental 'pattern studies', and dramatization. Yet it was only as a fragment of a larger, projected work. The film was produced independently, as part of an intended four-part documentary on the Depression entitled *As I Walk*. *Footnote to Fact* was the only completed section and

Jay Leyda: *A Life's Work*, ex. cat., New York: Photography Department Gallery, Tisch School of Arts, New York University, 1988, p. 4

¹⁹⁰ Leah Ollman, 'The Photo League's Forgotten Past', *History of Photography*, Summer 1994, p.157. However it did hold the first exhibition of John Heartfield's work in the USA in 1937.

¹⁹¹ Meyers and Leyda were credited as Robert Stebbins and Eugene Hill, respectively, to protect their identities—Leyda was by this stage working at MoMA. The film mixed drama and documentary in highlighting the poverty of the victims of the Depression.

was until recently thought to have been lost in 1940. Another section appeared as 'Highway 66: Montage Notes for a Documentary Film' in the February 1933 issue of *Experimental Cinema*. *Footnote to Fact* was never shown in public, and therefore had no discernable impact on American political film. Yet it was produced in dialogue with WFPL films. Some of the footage of a march in New York resembled WFPL newsreels—Jacobs had filmed for the WFPL in Kentucky and Alabama, covering the Scottsboro case in 1931, and whilst most of the New York marches were shot by Seltzer, as a WFPL member Jacobs had access to the footage.¹⁹² Alexander states that much footage made by Jacobs in New York over 1931 to 1933—possibly intended for *As I Walk*—was commandeered by the WFPL for their productions.¹⁹³ At the same time, many of the shots—angular glimpses of passing trains, washing lines of the breeze, signs advertising sales, and close-ups of vegetable stalls—were derived from city films, and seem like quotations from *A Bronx Morning*. At one stage there is even a shot of light on water reminiscent of Steiner's *H2O*. Therefore *Footnote to Fact* occupies the problematic area between WFPL productions and Steiner and Leyda's films, and the film operates as a dialectical montage of political and experimental cinema.

The film is essentially a montage exercise. Jacobs had termed Eisenstein's montage:

the plastic means toward profound effects and the nucleus of every subsequent film intelligence...a mighty style and a form that evolves and corresponds with the complexity and precision of the triumphant proletariat, the first to dominate the film's organic problem and the most able to saturate its structure with the programme of the revolutionary social substance.¹⁹⁴

Jacobs's manic editing ensured that the slender eight minutes of *Footnote to Fact* were crowded with images. The opening shot is of a trashcan, which is covered with a lid featuring the film's title, setting the tone for this pithy broadside on the Depression. A newspaper boy waving the latest edition walks towards the camera, then the film cuts to

¹⁹² Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back*, p. 72, Alexander, *Film on the Left*, p. 16. Alexander writes that the film was made during lunch breaks whilst working for a film trailer company.

¹⁹³ Alexander, *Film on the Left*, p. 16.

¹⁹⁴ Lewis Jacobs, 'Eisenstein', *Experimental Cinema*, Vol. 1, No. 3, February 1931, p. 4.

a woman swaying backwards and forwards (Fig. 172), then shifts to a hanging sign advertising a room to let, followed by a woman's dress hanging off a fire escape. The swaying woman is intercut throughout the film, but only at the end do we learn that she is in the throes of asphyxiation by gas in a horrible bed-sit suicide. The hanging sign and the hanging dress is a dark piece of associative montage on the theme of suicide, redolent of the hanging bicycle that refers to the worker's suicide in *Kuhle Wampe*. A sequence of shots of trains follows, similar to *A Bronx Morning*, although these are intercut with the gasping woman. Scenes of vegetable stalls and general street life ensue, but unlike in *A Bronx Morning*, in Jacobs's film the emphasis is on types of work. There are also numerous shots of store signs and advertisements. In one sequence, the word 'Burlesque' is evident, implying prurience only hinted at in Leyda's film. A scene of close-ups of working-class men smoking shifts into a selection of middle and upper class men, some of whom were clearly actors, before cutting to a display of pig's heads on a market stall. A further motif of fingers furiously tapping typewriter keys is intercut with the protagonist, followed by a montage of scenes of work and life around the market. The first obviously political moment occurs around the third minute, where a policeman collars a man at a protest (Fig. 173). Scenes of children, reminiscent of Leyda's film except depicted whole, are followed by a second political image—a march with banners against Fascism and unemployment, and supporting the Soviet Union. There are a few seconds of 'Steineresque' patterns of light on water, followed by a sequence of advertisements—sandwich boards announcing discounts and a banner with the legend 'Forgotten Men'—that are intercut with the fascistic American Legion striding through the streets saluting in unison, before the camera moves to a shot of man with a board with the words 'Unemployment Relief'.¹⁹⁵ Unemployed workers or hoboes pick through trash and shuffle listlessly on a wasteland (Fig. 174), followed by an upward pan from a sign stating 'Forced Sale' to another advertising 'Antiques'. Subsequently, the camera pans down from a sign stating 'your residential electricity bill is worth money to you' to a figure asleep on a bench below. A sequence of the homeless sleeping in doorways is contrasted with a piece of 'found' footage of artillery troops

¹⁹⁵ 'Forgotten Men' may refer to Mervyn LeRoy's 1933 musical on the Depression *Goldiggers of 1933*, which features the song 'Remember My Forgotten Man'.

loading and discharging a large field gun. Having reached this conclusion, that the State is destroying its own citizens, the film bolts through a flashback of all the previous images before the denouement, when we realize the terrible truth behind that haunting image of the swaying woman. The final shot is of her face as she dies, followed by her dropping head.

Of 'Highway 66', which continued the polemical invective of *As I Walk*, Charles Wolfe has observed that this montage scenario seems closer to experimental poetry than a screenplay.¹⁹⁶ It opened with an urban vista of the Depression:

—Limp cities alike in their escapes
and conquests
—Concordant traffic
—Dumb hordes long out of work
—Prowling.¹⁹⁷

Many of these shots were clearly abstract and associative:

—The undulation of a calve
or breast
calling for a hand
to plumb and survey
—It's greek fecundity!
—Faces
—Prolix and Stained
—In format vigilant
—Pouched in decay
—Caloried
—Sticky with time
—Rapt and furrowed.¹⁹⁸

The conjunction of the Depression and suicidal depression in *Footnote to Fact* was also evident in the following sequence:

¹⁹⁶ Charles Wolfe, 'Straight Shots and Crooked Plots: Social Documentary and the Avant-Garde in the 1930s', in Horak, ed., *Lovers of Cinema*, p. 253.

¹⁹⁷ Lewis Jacobs, 'Highway 66: Montage Notes for a Documentary Film', *Experimental Cinema*, Vol. 1, No. 4 February 1933, p. 40.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

—Screaming made
 from silence enforced
 —Or suicide
 from despatched venom
 The city swallows the sun
 Men hack God into bread.¹⁹⁹

A further fragment of *As I Walk* was referred to in the final edition of *Experimental Cinema*, of February 1934. A brief yet broad outline of ‘Experimental Cinema in America’, probably penned by Jacobs, discussed WFPL activities, Steiner’s films, Leyda’s activities, as well as the work of Browning, Watson and Webber, and Weinberg. Importantly, all these tendencies of experimental filmmaking were presented as an entire area of practice. *As I Walk* is listed as a ‘two-reel documentary of a working-class section of New York’.²⁰⁰ Intriguingly, this piece states that sound will be ‘used as a monologue’, suggesting that it would have anticipated the documentaries of the later 1930s. In 1947 Jacobs wrote the first history of experimental cinema in America and commented that ‘just when montage as a theory of film making was becoming firmly established, it was suddenly challenged by the invention of sound picture [and] experimental film-makers, like all others, were thrown into confusion’.²⁰¹ Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Alexandrov had warned of this outcome in their statement on sound films. Sound was a ‘two-edged invention’, that would only be effective when used in ‘pronounced non-coincidence with the visual images’, as sound applied merely to show ‘the illusion of people speaking, of the sound of objects and so on’ would ruin the tempo of the montage sequence and ‘will destroy the meaning of mounting’.²⁰²

As I Walk was never completed, and the silent fragment was barely seen. Yet Jacobs’s visceral montage hinted at a reconciliation between those rival positions

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 41.

²⁰⁰ ‘Experimental Cinema in America’, *Experimental Cinema*, February 1934, p. 54.

²⁰¹ Jacobs, p. 122.

²⁰² Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Grigori Alexandrov, ‘The Sound Film: A Statement from USSR’, *Close-Up*, October 1928, reprinted in James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus, *Close-Up, 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*, London: Cassell, 1998, pp. 83-4.

occupied by the factions of the WFPL, and more importantly indicated the possibilities for a political cinema that was derived from experimental cinema, and was both formally and rhetorically effective. Later in the decade, Pare Lorentz's *The Plough that Broke the Plains* (1936), photographed by Strand and Steiner, and *The River* (1938), photographed by van Dyke, Sidney Meyers's and Jay Leyda's 1937 *People of the Cumberland*, and Steiner and van Dyke's *The City* (1939), achieved a greater audience through greater technical sophistication than the WFPL, albeit with considerably less militant messages, government backing, and greater distribution opportunities. By contrast, Leo Hurwitz and Paul Strand's feature *Native Land* for Frontier Films, released 1942 (though made 1937-1939), was a belated American answer to the dramatic films of the Russian montage pioneers, and was arguably the closest Americans came to realizing an equivalent project.

If the area of activity oscillating around *Experimental Cinema* was a precursor to the New Deal documentary practice, it also represented the last gasp of the avant-garde aspect of the 'Amerika Machine'. The 'Red Decade' witnessed a hardening of political rhetoric and a filtering out of rogue elements, such as the mythic, spiritual discourse on the machine. *Experimental Cinema* straddled this transformation in its short run of five issues, witnessing the religiosity ascribed to montage and the machine fall away to the more immediate cinematic requirements of activist film units. The magazine limped along at the rate of an issue a year, before expiring in 1934, by which time it was mostly dedicated to rescuing Eisenstein's *Que Viva Mexico!* from the Hollywood editing abattoir. If montage was still occasionally discussed in *New Theatre* and the FPL's short-lived journal *Film Front*, and even used to considerable effect by King Vidor in the agrarian parable *Our Daily Bread* (1934), then its integration into American cinema as a generic means of editing witnessed the collapse of any association of intrinsic political power, finally erasing the traces of Constructivism.²⁰³

²⁰³ See Peter Martin, 'Montage: A New Form for the Revolutionary Theatre', *New Theatre*, March 1934. *Film Front* ran from late 1934 to March 1935.

CONCLUSION

Mr West in the Land of the Bolsheviks.

However little one may know Russia, what one learns is to observe and judge Europe with the conscious knowledge of what is going on in Russia. This is the first benefit to the intelligent European in Russia. But, equally, this is why the stay is so exact a touchstone for foreigners. It obliges everyone to choose his standpoint. Admittedly the only real guarantee of a correct understanding is to have chosen your position before you came. In Russia, above all, you can only see if you have already decided.... Only he who, by decision, has made his dialectical peace with the world can grasp the concrete. But someone who wishes to decide “on the basis of facts” will find no basis in the facts.

Walter Benjamin, 1927.¹

Crossing a square opposite the Lenin Institute in Moscow, in May 1931, the poet E. E. Cummings found a striking metaphor for the Soviet Union whilst witnessing a ‘rickety automobile street-sprinkler’ randomly spraying passers by:

some get drenched , some merely spattered ; and all are threatened , several escape’, [although] ‘not 1 scurrer, however, registers anything approximating indignation...I actually feel (at that moment) how perfectly the far famed revolution of revolutions resembles a running amok streetsprinkler, a normally benevolent mechanism which attains—thanks(possibly)to some defect in its construction or (possibly) to the ignorance or (probably)playfulness of its operator—distinct if spurious loss of unimportance ; certain transient capacity for clumsily mischievous behaviour...very naturally whereupon occur trivial and harmless catastrophes.’²

Cummings presented the new society as a rogue machine of dubious technology—mindlessly, perhaps malevolently, inflicting subjects with a banal form of terror. His account, entitled *Eimi*, was based on a diary kept during a five-week journey through Russia and Turkey, from 10 May to 14 June 1931, which included a lengthy

¹ Walter Benjamin, ‘Moscow’, 1927, in *One-Way Street*, trans. E. Jephcott and K. Shorter, London: Verso, 1979, p. 177

² E. E. Cummings, *Eimi*, New York: William Sloane Associates Inc, 1933. pp. 106-7. All grammatical and spelling idiosyncrasies are as presented in the book.

stay in Moscow, and brief visits to Kiev, Odessa, and Constantinople. His journey actually began and ended in Paris. The fifty page diary was developed during 1932 into the 432 pages of *Eimi*, which was published in 1933 to a largely hostile reception. The events recorded were for the most part banal episodes. Cummings passed the time wandering the streets, grappling with the convolutions of Soviet bureaucracy, attending the theatre, arguing (often drunkenly) with Western communists and fellow-travellers, calling on various acquaintances and contacts, and visiting a model prison. In a letter to the literary magazine *Contempo*, Cummings asserted that '*Eimi*'s source equals on-the-spot scribbled hieroglyphics', claiming 'that, through my subsequent deciphering of said hieroglyphics, not one situation has been revalued; not one situation has been contracted or expanded; not one significance has been warped; not one item has been omitted or inserted'.³ Yet *Eimi* was no simple document or travelogue, but an uncompromising piece of literary experimentation that lionized the individual and decried the Soviet Union as the 'unworld', a society founded on pure negativity and populated by ghosts.

Cummings based the book loosely on Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. *Eimi* (Greek for 'am') tells the story of a journey to Hell—if Russia was the 'Inferno', Turkey the 'Purgatorio', then Paris was the 'Paradisio'. However, as Lisa Nunn suggests, this reference was a form of 'scaffolding', a convenient if superficial metaphor to convey the central message of the book, that the Soviet Union was evil.⁴ The allusion to Dante was in keeping with the referential games of recent modernist literature, evident in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, and Cummings's own 1922 work *The Enormous Room*, which used John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* as a rough source. With its atomized characters, carnival of grotesques, preoccupation with the scatological and the obscene, fragmented dialogue, streams of consciousness, broken sentences, conjoined words, words broken by punctuation marks, typographic experimentation, repetition, interspersed poetry, nicknames, neologisms, quotations of advertisements, slogans, lists, menus, and timetables, *Eimi* was a monument to the myriad devices of modernist literature. It represented a shift from the tentative experimentation of *The Enormous*

³ E. E. Cummings, Letter to Editors, *Contempo*, 21 February 1933, p. 2.

⁴ Lisa Nunn, 'Cummings in Context: *Eimi*', *Spring*, October 1998, p. 140.

Room, where Cummings had revelled in caricatural descriptions of the hapless souls lurking in the faecal gloom of La Ferté, the holding prison in Southern France where he had been incarcerated for several months during World War One on the fictitious charge of espionage. It also reflected changes in his poetry during the 1920s, as Cummings moved from the meandering Elizabethan whimsy of *Tulips and Chimneys* of 1923 to a personalized idiom, which mixed formal experimentation with the vulgarisms of the street, through advertisement quotations and slang, in collections such as *& [AND]* of 1925, *is 5* of 1926, and *W [ViVa]* of 1931.

Cummings was by no means alone in his charges against the Soviet Union. The earliest critiques of the Soviet Union were part of the 'Red Scare' of 1919 and 1920, and had been dreamt up by representatives of big business, conservative politicians, and groups such as the National Civic Federation, the American Legion, and the burgeoning Klu Klux Klan. Rumours in the popular press of electric guillotines beheading 500 an hour were accompanied by numerous stories and stage productions, such as the fabled *Red Dawn*, which covered the nightmare scenario of a Bolshevik invasion of America. As opposed to the dramatic reportage on the Revolution by John Reed in *Ten Days That Shook the World* and Albert Rhys Williams in *Through the Russian Revolution*, 'Red Scare' literature was the product of those who had never set foot in Russia.

The first significant dissenting reports from visitors came from two victims of the 'Red Scare', the anarchists Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. Goldman's *My Disillusionment in Russia* of 1922 and Berkman's diary, published as *The Bolshevik Myth* in 1925, covered their two-year stay following their deportation from America in 1919. Early disquiet about the seeming preferential treatment of communist deportees over anarchists was not allayed, even after a cordial meeting with Lenin. Goldman and Berkman's concern over the direction of the Revolution was brought into sharp relief by the suppression of the mutiny at Kronstadt in March 1921. Berkman mournfully recorded in his diary:

March 17. —Kronstadt has fallen today.
Thousands of sailors and workers lie dead in its streets. Summary execution of prisoners and hostages continues.

March 18. —The victors are celebrating the anniversary of the Commune of 1871. Trotsky and Zinoviev denounce Thiers and Gallifet for the slaughter of the Paris rebels.⁵

Their disappointment in the Soviet Union was perhaps inevitable—after all, their model of revolution advanced a society without a state. Goldman wrote that it was the ‘State idea’ that ‘killed off the Russian Revolution and it must have the same result in all other revolutions, unless the *libertarian idea prevail*’.⁶ By 1935, she was claiming simply that ‘there is no Communism in Russia’, arguing that an autocratic form of state capitalism had merely replaced Tsarism, and that the citizens were effectively wage slaves.⁷

Whilst no revolutionary, Cummings shared an anarchistic scepticism towards government, evident in *The Enormous Room* where he satirized the absurdity and stupidity of authority figures. Furthermore, in a *Vanity Fair* article of 1925, entitled ‘How I Do Not Love Italy’, Cummings had rounded on Italian Fascism, casting ‘the Hon. Caesar Napoleon Mussolini’ as a comical bully—a former ‘wicked radical’ who, having ‘turned a complete backward somersault and landed an ultraconservative’, had his former communist comrades tortured.⁸ Likewise, in the collection *is 5* Cummings had detailed the brutal suppression of a communist demonstration in Paris:

The communists have fine Eyes

some are young some old none
look alike the flic rush
batter the crowd sprawls collapses
singing knocked down trampled kicked by
flics.⁹

⁵ Alexander Berkman, *The Bolshevik Myth (Diary 1920-1922)* New York: Boni and Liveright Inc., 1925, p. 302

⁶ Emma Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia*, London: The C.W. Daniel Company, 1922, p. 257.

⁷ Emma Goldman, ‘There Is No Communism in Russia’ in *American Mercury*, April 1935, reprinted in Alix Kates Shulman, ed., *Red Emma Speaks: The Selected Speeches and Writings of the Anarchist and Feminist*, London: Wildwood House 1979, p. 359.

⁸ E. E. Cummings, ‘How I Do Not Love Italy’, *Vanity Fair*, October 1926, reprinted in George J. Firmage, ed., *E. E. Cummings: A Miscellany Revised*, New York: October House Inc., 1965, p. 166.

⁹ E. E. Cummings, ‘IX’, *is 5*, 1926, in George J. Firmage, ed., *E. E. Cummings: Complete Poems*, New York: Liveright, 1991, p.273.

In contrast to the ‘bruised narrow questioning faces’ of the heroic communists, the ‘Prefect of Police’ is ridiculed as

(a dapper derbied
creature, swaggers daintily
twiddling
his tiny cane
and, mazurkas about tweak-
ing his wing collar pecking at his im-
-peccable cravat directing being
shooting his cuffs
saluted everywhere saluting
reviewing processions of minions
tapping people on the back

“allez circulez”)

—my he’s brave.¹⁰

This derision of authority and compassion for the subjugated peppered his work in the 1920s and early 1930s. In *ViVa*, published as Cummings prepared to travel to Russia, he saluted ‘Olaf’, a persecuted conscientious objector ‘whose warmest heart recoiled at war’, and whose defiant, caustic outbursts, such as ‘I will not kiss your fucking flag’ and ‘There is some shit I will not eat’, offended ‘our president’, and landed him in ‘a dungeon, where he died’.¹¹

His statements on the Soviet Union before 1931 were scant and inconsequential—best summed up in the juvenile names of Russian characters, ‘Olga Jerkhov’ and ‘Dimitri Fukk’, in his 1930 comic novella *A Book Without A Title*. In *Eimi*, he brushes off inquiries concerning his motives for visiting ‘je suis venu en Russie; parce que je ne le sais pas moi-même’.¹² He claimed that it was just ‘plain downright curiosity: that very greatest of all the virtues’; this curiosity was probably roused by reports from friends such as Dos Passos and Louis Aragon.¹³ Cummings travelled on a

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 274.

¹¹ E. E. Cummings, ‘XXX’, *W (ViVa)*, 1931, in *ibid*, p. 340.

¹² E. E. Cummings, *Eimi*, p. 65.

¹³ Cummings, *Eimi*, p. 301; Dos Passos travelled to Russia in 1928, and over the next decade produced some accounts of his journey that were more favourable than

‘without-party’ visa, brokered by Dos Passos, which spared him the official tourist programme of factories and farms.¹⁴ His experience of the Soviet Union was almost entirely confined to cities. His comments were thus restricted to observations on Soviet urban life. The majority of the people he met were expatriates.

Nevertheless, his objections to the Soviet Union stemmed from a rejection of an abstract conception of the new society as a mechanical device that enslaved the individual. Although the Soviet machine age was mostly occurring in the great rural expanse, its effects seemingly permeated the entire country, and were perceptible in the appearance and behaviour of all, from border guards to passing city dwellers. Chiefly, it robbed the citizens of the essence of existence. In *Eimi*, the Soviet Union is purely negative—life is ‘nonlife’, meat is ‘nonmeat’, the train is a ‘nontrain’, and so on.¹⁵ As he encountered the city of ‘Moscowless’, Cummings described ‘a new realm, whose inhabitants are made of each other’.¹⁶ These citizens were ‘eachotherish’, strange ghostlike forms without definition that disintegrate and merge together into a terrifying mass. In *Eimi*, the passage that most forcefully states the negation of individualism in the Soviet Union is the section concerning the visit to Lenin’s Mausoleum. Cummings described the throng waiting to look on the embalmed leader:

facefacefaceface
hand-
fin-
claw
foot-
hoof
(tovarich)
es to number of numberlessness(un
-smiling)’.¹⁷

Cummings, but not entirely celebratory. See ‘Rainy Days in Leningrad’, *New Masses*, February 1929 and ‘Russian Visa’, *In All Countries*, London: Constable, 1934;

¹⁴ Richard S. Kennedy, *Dreams in the Mirror: A Biography of E. E. Cummings*, New York: Liveright, 1980, p. 308.

¹⁵ Strangely, Russian women rather than men were ‘nonmen’—apparently devoid of the feminine attributes of the Western woman, although, given Cummings’ complete misogyny, attractive young women were avoided such categorization.

¹⁶ Cummings, *Eimi*, p. 21.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 240.

They move:

All Toward the grave)of himself of herself(all toward the grave of
Themselves)all toward the grave of Self.¹⁸

Cummings scoffed at the body on display, which seemed to him less convincing than a Coney Island waxwork. If Lenin was the Antichrist of the unworld, then the droves of Russian pilgrims were semi-formed subhumans with devils' bodies, devoid of definition as they shuffled forward in a horrible 'eachotherish' procession. These satanic beings were filth-strewn and formless: 'with dirt's dirt dirty dirtier with others' dirt with dirt of themselves dirtiest waitstand dirtily never smile shufflebudge dirty pausehalt smilingless'.¹⁹

There was a central paradox in Cummings's appreciation of the Soviet Union—if Cummings had truly despised Communism as a system of enslavement, why then did he care so little for its slaves? It is worth comparing *Eimi* with Maxim Gorky's 'The City of the Yellow Devil', a 1906 account of a visit to New York, which had a surprisingly similar tone as the author also grappled with a strange city. Ironically, Cummings spent most of his time in Russia trying and eventually failing to gain an audience with Gorky. Gorky observed the city from the ocean liner that brought him:

from this distance the city seems like a vast jaw, with uneven black teeth. It breathes clouds and puffs like a glutton suffering from his obesity. Entering the city is like getting into a stomach of stone and iron, a stomach that has swallowed several million people and is grinding and digesting them.²⁰

Here 'a cold and evil force labours unseen', the power of gold, the 'yellow devil', drives the New Yorkers on a hideous treadmill.²¹ He wrote:

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 241.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 240.

²⁰ Maxim Gorky, 'The City of the Yellow Devil', 1906, in *The City of the Yellow Devil: Pamphlets, Articles and Letters About America*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972, p. 9.

²¹ Ibid, p. 8.

grimly and monotonously it operates this stupendous machine, in which ships and docks are only small parts, and man an insignificant screw, an invisible dot amid the unsightly, dirty tangle of iron and wood, the chaos of steamers, boats and barges loaded with cars.²²

The citizens maunder about in the dim shadows of the sickly yellow light that emanates from skyscraper windows. The New Yorkers seemed to Gorky expressionless, their 'freedomless energy' pulsed by the unrelenting Yellow Devil. The sooty, turbulent city was crammed with filthy people: 'they swarm in the filthy gutters, rub up against one another like flotsam in a turbid stream; they are tossed and whirled by the force of hunger, they are animated by the acute desire for something to eat'.²³ Everyone in the city is 'enslaved' by 'the vile wizardry' that 'lulls their souls, makes them flexible tools in the hands of the Yellow Devil, the ore out of which he smelts unceasingly the Gold that is his flesh and blood'.²⁴

Both Cummings and Gorky's accounts can be judged as the fantastical extrapolations of the shocked and alienated literary tourist in a bewildering environment. In both cases, the underlying social order was projected onto the city and its citizens. Cummings saw in Soviet Communism the same horror Gorky had found in America's technological modernity. Yet Gorky's account was predicated on compassion—the Americans were pitied rather than hated, and it was the barbarism of their enslavement that angered him. For Cummings, the Russian people embodied the evil of their enslavement and became indistinguishable from their predicament. Gorky's text concerns the tragedy of New York's victims, lingering on the poverty of the many and the deluded self-satisfaction of the affluent few, whereas Cummings's sole tragic figure is the artist, an abstract individual, and not the Russian people lost to Sovietism. Yet both agreed that the respective social systems were impervious and dehumanizing machines. The 'Amerika Machine' developed in this thesis indicates an inversion of these perceptions, where 'the other' represents beneficence rather than malevolence.

As stated, the personification of the 'Amerika Machine' was the engineer. Cummings cited the American engineer as the 'master of the machine, Soviet Russia's

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid, p. 14.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 17.

god' and the machine as '20th century man's covered wagon'.²⁵ In *Eimi*, Cummings frequently denounced the machine age, and imagined the USSR as a dangerous, unstoppable machine. His assault on Louis Aragon's epic poem *The Red Front* exemplified this modernist anti-Modernism. Whilst in Russia, Cummings translated the poem for publication in *Literature of the World Revolution*, the organ of the Revolutionary Writers Bureau, and recorded his responses in *Eimi*, in a sort of intertextual review. The translation was a gesture of thanks to Aragon, who had written him letters of introduction for his stay in Moscow. One of these letters was for Lili Brik, sister of Aragon's wife Elsa Triolet, and the onetime muse of both Ossip Brik and Mayakovsky, and model for photomontages by Rodchenko. Cummings recalled a conversation with Brik about Aragon's stay in Russia:

To me he was enthusiastic; although I've heard he didn't have an easy time here—²⁶

To which she replied:

It was in Paris he didn't have an easy time (she corrects). His former associates, those idle aesthetes of the Latin Quarter, resented the fact that our friend had turned communist.²⁷

Aragon had returned from 1930 Second International Congress of Revolutionary Writers at Kharkov convinced that dialectical materialism was the 'sole revolutionary philosophy' and revolution the true purpose of Surrealism.²⁸ An incendiary epic invoking extreme political violence, *The Red Front* was the first fruit of Aragon's intensified political commitment and was written whilst the author was still in Russia. When Cummings's version was published in October 1931 the reception in Paris was tremulous as Aragon was threatened with a five-year prison sentence for inciting political violence. The so-called 'Aragon Affair' marked the writer's final departure

²⁵ Cummings, *Eimi*, p. 206.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 64.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Cited in Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, trans R. Howard, London: Penguin, 1973, p. 176.

from the Surrealists—although André Breton had rallied a petition of support, he nonetheless dismissed *The Red Front* as ‘a poem of circumstance’.²⁹ By May 1932, the situation had cooled with the pardoning of Aragon by Albert Lebrun, the new French president. Cummings followed these events nervously, concerned mostly that the furore would result in visa problems when he next visited Paris.

In *Eimi*, Cummings named the poem ‘choo-choo’, mocking Aragon’s metaphor of the Soviet Union as an unstoppable train, as evident in the poem’s crescendo:

It’s the train of the red star
which burns the stations the signals the skies
SSSR October October it’s the express
October across the universe SS
SR SSSR SSSR
SSSR SSSR.³⁰

This was Cummings’s sour response:

(and now, comrades, we come to this paeon’s infantile climax : now the language, fairly wetting its drawers, begins achugging and apuffing—“all aboard!” the paeaner now ecstatically cries—“everybody jump on the red train!” (alias , N.B., the bandwagon)—“nobody will be left behind!” (and of course Prosperity is just around the Corner)—U-S-S-R , choo-choo-choo-choo(your name’s in the paper)wake up and dream.³¹

He used this motif to condemn the Soviet Union:

‘USSR a USSR a night— USSR a nightmare USSR home of the panacea Negation
haven of all (in life’s name) Deathworshippers hopper of hate’s Because machine (U for
un— S for self S for science and R for— reality) how it shrivels: how it dwindles

²⁹ André Breton, ‘The Poverty of Poetry: The Aragon Affair Before Public Opinion’, reprinted in *ibid*, p. 303.

³⁰ Louis Aragon, ‘The Red Front’, 1931, trans. E. E. Cummings, reprinted in George J. Firmage, ed., *E. E. Cummings: A Miscellany Revised*, New York: October House Inc., 1965, p. 273.

³¹ Cummings, *Eimi*, p. 143.

withers; how it wilts diminishes, wanes, how it crumbles evaporates collapses disappears—the verily consubstantial cauchemar of premeditated NYET’.³²

Whereas in Aragon’s poem ‘USSR’ was propulsive and epochal, here it was a signifier of dissipation into negativity. Cummings’s intertextual riposte to *The Red Front* was a form of counter-propaganda by mimicry. His ‘Ballad of an Intellectual’, which was published in *Americana* in 1932, cited a key target of this counter-propaganda:

or as comrade Shakespeare remarked of old
All That Glisters Is Mike Gold’
(but a rolling snowball gathers no sparks
—and the same holds true of Karl the Marks).³³

Cummings perhaps referred to works such as Gold’s ‘120 Million’, a collective chant for that number of people that invoked a Soviet America. It concluded vigorously:

I see peace for the 120 million.
I see a Hammer-Sun by day,
A Sickle-Moon by night,
Shining on a new America,
A Workers’ and Farmers’ America.³⁴

Yet until *Eimi* Cummings was still a laudable figure for the Left. In April 1933, the Marxist poet and critic Isidor Schneider championed *The Enormous Room*, writing that ‘Mr Cummings, at present, avoids the revolutionists. But in his affirmation as an artist he joins hands with them in their affirmation as revolutionists. And in the society which they will establish his book at last finds its agreeing public’.³⁵ His immediate horror on confronting *Eimi*, which was published eight days later, can only be guessed

³² Ibid, p. 413.

³³ E. E. Cummings, ‘Ballad of an Intellectual’, 1932, reprinted in George J. Firmage, ed., *E. E. Cummings: A Miscellany Revised*, New York: October House Inc., 1965, p. 279.

³⁴ Michael Gold, ‘120 Million’, in *120 Million*, London: Modern Books, 1929, p. 192.

³⁵ Isidor Schneider, ‘The Enormous Room’, *Contempo*, Vol. III, No. 8, 5 April 1933, p. 5. Schneider was author of *Comrade Mister*, a 1934 collection of proletarian poetry. He was an avant-gardist in the 1920s.

at. This was an unfortunate judgment on Schneider's part, as two sections of *Eimi* had already been published in the arts journal *Hound and Horn* in late 1932.³⁶ Furthermore, in an introduction to the 1932 edition of *The Enormous Room*, Cummings had declared that his forthcoming book would denounce the Soviet Union as a 'more enormous room'.³⁷ Schneider's response would eventually arrive in 1935, in a furious review of the volume *No Thanks for New Masses*, entitled 'E. (i.o.u.) Noncummings'. Schneider made a piquant reference to *Eimi*: 'unlife and non-men are laid out in this poetry as they packed the morgue-like vaults of his Hearstian Russian Diary'.³⁸ In a stirring broadside to modernist poetry, he proclaimed:

the culture of capitalism is dying varied deaths. Where it does not disappear through sheer neglect, where it does not run for the last sacrament to the church like T. S. Eliot, where it does not starve itself to death before the urns of tradition like Allen Tate, it gyrates to death in the St. Vitus dance of hysterical individualism.³⁹

In the final analysis, Cummings's work was antiquated, belonging to the bohemian enclave of Greenwich Village and the Paris excursion, during those irresponsible years lost in 'hazes of gin and bobbed-hair mysticism'.⁴⁰

In the 1950s, Malcolm Cowley summed up Cummings's philosophical position as 'conservative Christian Anarchism', a form of what Jeffrey Herf has recently identified as 'reactionary Modernism'.⁴¹ The term 'reactionary Modernism' was applied to explain the curious mix of technological fervour and anti-Modernism within certain strands of Nazi ideology—a dangerous brew that melded spirit and machine towards rearmament and war. Yet Herf espies a broader geographical scope covered by the term, and notes that whilst the German situation was unique and reactionary Modernism was at its most pronounced there:

³⁶ E. E. Cummings, 'From a Russian Diary', *Hound and Horn*, October-December 1932.

³⁷ E. E. Cummings, 'Introduction' to *The Enormous Room*, 1922, New York: The Modern Library, 1932, London: Penguin Books, 1968, p. 8.

³⁸ Isidor Schneider, 'E. (i.o.u.) Noncummings' *New Masses*, 25 June 1935, p. 26.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴¹ Malcolm Cowley, *A Second Flowering: Works and Days of the Lost Generation*, London: André Deutsch, 1956, p. 113.

in Italy, France, and England, the avant-garde associated technology with a new antibourgeois vitalism, masculine violence and eros, and the will to power; a new aesthetics, and creativity rather than commercial parasitism; and a full life lived to the emotional limit that contrasted with bourgeois decadence and boredom.⁴²

The protagonists were Ezra Pound, Filippo Marinetti, and Percy Wyndham Lewis. Common to all of these was a pronounced opposition to Marxism articulated in an engagement with official Fascism but more correctly identified as constituent of 'Proto-fascism', a term that might extend to Cummings's position.

Fredric Jameson argues Proto-fascism's:

elaboration as an ideology is, however, determined less by the practical dangers of Marxism and Communism than by the disintegration and functional discrediting—even after the failure of revolution on the Left—of the various hegemonic and legitimizing ideologies of the middle class state (Liberalism, conservatism, Catholicism, social democracy, etc.).⁴³

This essentially 'petty bourgeois' position eventually finds voice in a 'mass ideological party', such as in Germany or Italy, but its most virulent form is as an anticapitalist 'impulse' driven by 'free floating attitudes'.⁴⁴ Importantly Proto-fascism is directed at the apparatus of the state, particularly bourgeois democracy, but is couched, most overtly, in bitter enmity towards Marxism. In *Eimi*, Cummings railed against all forms of progressive politics:

'O Millikan, O Marx! —Page by all means a certain Mr Cosmic Ray, Mary mother of Joshua ben Lenin ben Joseph ben Franklin ben Stalin ben Roosevelt ben Big Ben ben Big Stick ben Evolent ben Lightningrod'.⁴⁵

⁴² Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 47.

⁴³ Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist*, University of California Press, 1979, p. 15.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 15-16.

⁴⁵ Cummings, *Eimi*, p. 52. This was a rare reference to Stalin. Lenin was deemed the Antichrist instead, perhaps due the convenience of the death-cult metaphor.

Cummings later became a persistent critic of the New Deal, an opponent of Liberalism, and an increasingly zealous individualist.

Fourteen publishers turned down his next volume of poetry, hence its eventual title—*No Thanks*. Yet Cummings's reputation would be restored in the 1940s and 1950s, and *Eimi* found a few friends as post-war anti-Sovietism set in and the Red Scare returned.⁴⁶ In 1946, Dos Passos, who had abandoned his former radicalism, dubbed the book 'shrewd odd annoyingly sound'.⁴⁷ Bitterly out of time in the 'Red Decade', Cummings found a new role as an incorrigible uncle of rebellious American adolescents in the Cold War.

Yet, for all Cummings's moral defects and disinterest in evidence, there was some force in his opposition to those who either glossed over or refused to see the increasingly brutal direction towards tyranny that the Soviet Union was taking during the 'Great Retreat'.⁴⁸ Many of the figures discussed in this thesis were attracted to Socialism's claim to social justice but became unfortunately allied with a murderous regime. Their avoidance of the terror stemmed from a refusal to allow that the failure of the revolution and the fading hope of Socialism in Russia was more than a rumour spread by its enemies, especially as the Depression grew and the once prosperous America lay in ruins, stimulating interest in the apparent miracle underway in Russia.

Yet Cummings seemed unable to grasp that for many the Soviet Union functioned as a counterpoint to the USA and its inherent divisions. Writing in *International Literature* in 1933, the black American poet Langston Hughes enthused that 'in Moscow, the balance is all in favor of the negro'.⁴⁹ He reported the case of Robert N. Robinson, the black Jamaican who was attacked by white Americans in the

⁴⁶ Favourable reviews were Francis Fergusson 'When We Were Very Young', *The Kenyon Review*, Autumn 1950; 'Russia Revisited', *Time*, 14 February 1949.

⁴⁷ John Dos Passos, Untitled Piece on E. E. Cummings, *The Harvard Wake*, No. 5, Spring 1946, p. 64.

⁴⁸ Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Introduction', in Sheila Fitzpatrick ed., *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931*, Indiana University Press, 1978, p. 6. The term was coined by the sociologist N. S. Timasheff in 1934 to describe the seeming abandonment of revolutionary aims.

⁴⁹ Langston Hughes, 'Negroes in Moscow', *International Literature*, 4, October 1933, p.

canteen at Tractorstroi—his persecutors were immediately expelled from the country.⁵⁰ There were many other black comrades working in the USSR, not just in factories—Hughes celebrated Wayland Rudd at Meyerholds' Theatre, Emma Harris singing and speaking for International Red Aid, black participants at the Mezhrabpom film studios and in the Kharkov Opera.⁵¹ Cummings recorded seeing a black man in Moscow, and revealed the worst of his ingrained prejudice when he spoke of 'a very black nigger a real coon not stuffed not a ghost he might have stepped out of Small's paradise'.⁵² Such attitudes had stifled black writers' careers in America—Hughes noted that Moscow was the first city he'd lived in where a black writer could make a living, and not have work turned down for being too controversial or for exceeding the unofficial quota of black writers. He argued that 'stories that show Negroes as savages, fools, or clowns, they will often print', but conversely intelligent, non-patronizing commissions for black writers arose but occasionally, and an author 'can't live on blue moons'.⁵³

Hughes had travelled to Russia with a party of twenty-two black Americans to work with Pudovkin and Nikolai Eck on a film entitled *Black and White*, a project which was eventually cancelled. He remained for several months and, like Lozowick, visited Central Asia, where he observed 'Socialism tearing down the customs of ages: veiled women, concubinage, mosques, Allah-worship, and illiteracy disappearing'.⁵⁴ He recorded that in Tashkent a handful of black Americans were working at a Machine and Tractor Station.⁵⁵ This equation of the easy mobility and equal rights of black Americans in Russia with the Soviet technological revolution was underscored by Hughes' translation of a fragment of Louis Aragon's 'Magnitogorsk', a poem that cited the great power of the steel works as a symbol of the Soviet Union:

The agitator comrade from the Komsomols
in the dusk of the village

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 79.

⁵¹ Ibid, pp. 80-81.

⁵² E. E. Cummings, *Eimi*, p.338.

⁵³ Langston Hughes, 'Moscow and Me', p. 64.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 63.

⁵⁵ Langston Hughes, 'Negroes in Moscow', p. 80.

re-tells in one breath the modern legend
 Marx, October and Lenin
 the taking of the Winter Palace
 the commissars of Baku
 Kolchak and his sister the famine
 and all at once and all at once
 he explains what is being smelted
 he explains the world
 he explains what will be
 Magnitogorsk, Magnitogorsk
 Do you hear Magnitogorsk.⁵⁶

Besides translating Aragon's poetry, Cummings and Hughes shared a common history in that they both lived in Paris in the early 1920s. However, Hughes travelled to Europe as a seaman on a steamship and paid for his Parisian excursion by working in the kitchens of Le Grand Duc, an American nightclub in Montmartre the hub of the black Parisian community that specialized in jazz and was frequented by expatriates. Whilst Hughes washed dishes, Cummings enjoyed the champagne fuelled life of a rentier, sending giddy missives back to America—in one instance, he reported on the power of Josephine Baker's dancing in *The Chocolate Dandies* revue as 'a mysteriously unkillable Something, equally nonprimitive and uncivilized or, beyond time in the sense that emotion is beyond arithmetic...and we still find ourselves remembering the jungle' during the intermission.⁵⁷ In other words, Cummings's jest that 'the much misunderstood metropolis of Paris (France) is at present two cities' (occupied by simpatico Americans or vulgar tourists) was deeply inadequate.⁵⁸

An opposition of these two American travellers to Paris and Moscow may seem facile—contrasting Cummings, the wealthy Harvard educated white, with Hughes, the poor southern black whose poverty denied him a university education, merely confirms the deep rooted racial inequalities that have always bedevilled American society. Yet it explains much of their divergent projections onto the Soviet Union. If Hughes' image of

⁵⁶ Louis Aragon, 'Magnitogorsk', trans. Langston Hughes, *International Literature*, 4, October 1933, p. 83.

⁵⁷ E. E. Cummings, 'Vive la Folie!', *Vanity Fair*, September 1926, reprinted in George J. Firmage, ed., *E. E. Cummings: A Miscellany Revised*, p. 162.

⁵⁸ E. E. Cummings, 'Conflicting Aspects of Paris', *Vanity Fair*, August 1926, reprinted in *ibid*, p.159.

black Americans driving tractors in Tajikistan appears retrospectively imbued with profoundly tragic irony, then it is worth conjuring the imagery of the American South, and remembering the photograph of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith hanging from poplar trees in August 1930 (Fig. 175), an image of murder that enraged and galvanized black Americans (Fig. 176) and inspired Lewis Allen's 1937 poem *Strange Fruit*, which was later hauntingly interpreted in song by Billie Holliday.⁵⁹ Looking at America from Moscow, Hughes wrote:

You never miss the water till the well runs dry. Those who ought to know, tell me that you never really appreciate Moscow until you get back to the land of the bread lines, unemployment, Jim Crow cars and crooked politicians, brutal bankers and overbearing police, three per cent beer and the Scottsboro case.⁶⁰

Clearly, the example of E. E. Cummings in Russia indicates the tensions within American Modernism and its deeply ambiguous attitude towards modernity. *Eimi* represents a point of no return, where the illusion of Modernism as a broad church cracked apart during hard times and battle lines were drawn. There is a danger here of making distinctions of 'good Modernism' versus 'bad Modernism', or assuming that if Cummings and Hughes's rival class positions were simply reflected in the form of their work, and the conflict was between bourgeois and proletarian culture. It should be clear that throughout this study no such bipartition has been accepted, and the notion of proletarianism as an exemplary model has not been reclaimed. It is hoped that those who did not jump off the out of control train that was Stalinism have neither been redeemed nor rebuked. They were guilty only of placing too much faith in the promise of Socialism in Russia, and being unable to believe that the opportunity for a socialist society there had been squandered so bloodily.

In this thesis, I have attempted to convey the complexities that arose when Americans looked at the Soviet Union and saw Russians looking back at them, and how this transatlantic phenomenon, the Amerika Machine, was manifested in America as

⁵⁹ Lewis Allen was a pseudonym of Abel Meeropol, a Jewish schoolteacher from New York who was a member of the CPUSA. He later adopted the children of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were executed on the charge of espionage in 1953.

⁶⁰ Langston Hughes, 'Moscow and Me', *International Literature*, 3, 1933, p. 66.

machine art, a contested field that frustrated exact signification. Alan Dawley has discussed Modernism in America as a ‘mask of harmony over an internally divided society’.⁶¹ The machine fulfilled such a function—its equivalence indicated order rather than disparity. Yet as an inscrutable sign, it referred to both and neither situation. Those ideological formations that imagined the machine could simply be claimed like territory were mistaken.

Like the machine, Modernism was and is a contested territory—an expanded field of conflicting positions, in production and reception. The arrival of Postmodernism, following Modernism’s apparent demise, merely referred to one aspect, the high Modernism of MoMA and the International Style (in art history, the celebrated fall guy was Clement Greenberg). Whatever Postmodernism might have been—the collapse of Modernism or just ‘late Modernism’—its impact on Humanities was such that a materialist account now marks a departure from orthodoxy. Cultural analysis determined by subjective responses informed mainly by secondary sources, and hostile to history as archaic mechanistic empiricism, is something of an international style. Whilst the fruit might be fragrant and variegated, too often it tastes the same. It is hoped that this study has shown that materialist history does not tell the tale just for the sake of revealing an untold story, but stimulates the germination of counter-narratives, through which we can negotiate the past and its artefacts as prophecies of the present.

⁶¹ Alan Dawley, *Struggles for Justice: Social Responsibility and the Liberal State*, Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 313.

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